Love is Blind

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/41368944.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Hannibal Lecter, Bella Crawford/Jack Crawford
Characters:	Will Graham, Will Graham's Father, Hannibal Lecter, Jack Crawford, Beverly Katz, Original Characters, Jimmy Price, Brian Zeller, Dr. Frederick Chilton, Freddie Lounds, Francis Dolarhyde, Franklyn Froideveaux, Tobias Budge, Randall Tier
Additional Tags:	Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Blood and Gore, Canon-Typical Violence, Angst with a Happy Ending, Fluff, Domestic Violence, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Mythical Beings & Creatures, References to Ancient Greek Religion & Lore, Bullying
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-08-30 Updated: 2023-03-19 Words: 38,928 Chapters: 8/?

Love is Blind

by meraki_arcane

Summary

Every fifty years, someone's name is drawn to go up the side of a cursed mountain as a sacrifice. It's the only way to keep the magic, which seals away a monster with an insatiable hunger and ability to turn humans to stone, strong. The time has come and this time it's Will's name who's called.

Sent up the mountain to die, what happens when Will returns to town before nightfall, unscathed and ordered to return the next day by the monster that was supposed to kill him?

This story is based around the Greek mythology of Medusa, but I took some liberties. Meet Medusa!Hannibal and Sacrifice!Will.

On hold until I finish Part 1 of No Harms List

Notes

I did it. Oops. Just couldn't get this story idea out of my head, so I started typing and found myself with a possible story. Hope you enjoy this twisted version of Greek mythology! This should be an interesting ride.

TW: a small moment of child abuse and mentions of bullying

Not beta read

See the end of the work for more notes

Organized Hoarding and Curses

The river gurgled as Will dipped his bucket in it. The water was icy. It felt like pins and needles digging into his skin, turning his fingers red. He could barely feel them. With it still early spring, ice clung to the edge of the water. There were a few sections of the river still completely iced over, though it was no longer thick enough to walk across.

The trees rattled overhead as a brisk wind cut through, chilling Will. His nose and ears had already gone a bright pink from the cold. This time of year, he let his hair grow long and beard grow out to try and help preserve his body heat. But it also meant that ice tended to form in his beard.

Lifting the bucket from the water, he checked to make sure nothing had gotten caught in it, like stones or twigs. The second bucket sat at his heels already full. A small string of fish was tied to his carrying stick with his fishing rod tied to it. There weren't many but it was still early enough that he was grateful that he'd been able to catch that much. The spring run wouldn't come for at least another month when the fish swam upstream to lay eggs. Then he'd have to be careful not to take too many. His best hauls were when the run were done. Then he could stock up and not worry about damaging the population since they would have already laid their eggs for the year.

Setting the bucket down, Will balled his hands in his cloak to dry them before breathing against his fingers. These last two buckets should finish filling the barrel by his home. He'd already done four loads this morning, but it meant that he wouldn't have to do it for almost a week. More if the spring rains came early.

He glanced up. The trees were still barren enough to be able to see the sky clearly. Only a few brave green buds of leaves had started popping up on two or three trees. Dark clouds swirled overhead, roiling angrily. A few birds tried to fly against the wind, swaying and dipping with its current.

Will hoped it didn't rain. This time of year meant a high chance of it coming as either sleet or snow rather than rain. And even if it did manage to rain, temperatures tended to drop after, turning everything to a sheet of ice. After three solid months of it, he was sick of it, no matter how pretty it was when it clung to the trees and sides of homes. He'd almost broken his arm twice this winter from slipping on the ice.

If he had, he would have really been in trouble. There weren't many who would have been willing to help him if something happened.

The thought made him frown, looking at his shaking fingers. They were nicked with scars from years of small injuries. His hands were rough, skin cracking from the cold, dry air. The skin around his nails was peeling too. He couldn't afford buying the ointment that help. Though, he was sure that Bella, the town healer and wife of the mayor, would just give him some if she knew.

She was kind like that. The only other person who was that kind to Will was a girl named Beverely.

Looking back up, the dead trees showed Will a clear view straight up the mountain side that his village sat against. It was an anomaly. The only one around, it stuck out like a sore spot. It loomed over all of them, seeming to reach for the heavens. Legends surrounded it. Dark and ugly ones that terrified even the adults. None of the townsfolk went up it and neither did Will. They hunted and gathered the materials around it.

It seemed to swell larger the longer Will looked at it, bending down over him. Like something other was staring down at him, watching. A shiver ran up his spine.

A crunch of rocks had Will looking around. While it was still too soon for bears, they sometimes woke early from hibernation. He always had to be on guard for them or wolves. But he found it was just Lo walking his way, stepping lightly on the rocks that lined the bank. His long blond hair was pulled back into a ponytail, his bow sticking out behind his shoulder where he had it slung.

Seeing Will looking at him, Lo grinned crookedly at him, waving energetically. Lo was a recluse, remaining deep in the woods, near the mountain. He tended to steer away from many of the townsfolk, with the exception of Will. It was probably a good thing though. Will was sure if he lived in the village, he'd be hounded by women and men alike. Nothing else could describe him other than him being devastatingly handsome. His face had an ageless quality, sky blue eyes bright with mischief. His skin was flawless, no scars marring it, and held the sun kissed tan even through the winter, whereas Will tended to go bone pale.

Standing, Will wiped his hands off on his pants, pulling his cloak tighter around him as Lo came to stand next to him, evaluating the fish he'd caught. Energy radiated off the man. Where Will could remain still for ages, Lo was almost always in motion. Will had tried hunting with him once when he'd first started to get to know the strange man, but Lo's inability to sit still scared all their prey away before they could get to them.

When Will had said as much, Lo had laughed. "Yep, but with this face, I can just charm someone into giving me food if I need it."

"You live in the middle of the woods. Who are you planning on charming?"

Lo nodded solemnly, completely serious as he said, "You're right. I'll just charm the rabbits into my traps. People always say I could charm the God of the Underworld if I wanted, so what's a few wee little bunnies." He then fell into a fit of laughter.

After that interaction, Will was sure the man would starve to death that winter, but somehow he'd made it. Now, almost five years since then, Will found something comforting about Lo's boisterous personality. It often meant Will didn't have to say much. He tended to carry the conversation all on his own, only needing an occasional grunt from Will to let him know he was still listening.

"Morning, Will. You got a good catch today," Lo said, his voice was melodic, warm and lyrical. He held up his empty traps, arms appearing from the depths of his many layers. He

hated the cold. He was almost always bundled up to his nose till late spring. “Such a capable man. Good quality for a spouse. Whereas I have come up empty handed, which is not a good quality in a spouse.” He paused as he shook his empty traps at Will. Will just waited for him to finish, since Lo could never resist saying something ridiculous when he had the chance. He didn’t have to wait long before Lo was teasingly saying, “We're a perfect fit. Balance each other out and everything. You are capable, and I am useless. We should just marry. Then I never have to worry about food ever again.”

“And what, exactly, would I be getting out of that?” Will asked as he hooked his buckets on either end of his carrying stick and lifted it so it sat across his shoulders. When he looked at Lo, his eyes stopped around the man’s throat. Will was of average height and Lo was just slightly shorter, so he had to tilt his head down to look at his neck.

Even having known the man for a long time, he still wasn’t comfortable looking him in the eyes. His *curse* made it difficult for him to look people in the eye. It made the townsfolk leery of him, pushing him to the edge of town having them keep their distance. Lo had never asked him why he never looked him in the eyes, but he also always seemed to just know things. Will wouldn’t be surprised if he’d heard rumors from the people in the village about him on one of the rare occasions he did travel into town for supplies.

Lo gave him a dashing smile. “A beautiful house husband of course. I’m a great cook.”

“You told me charred rabbit is your favorite because it’s the only thing you ever seem to cook.”

“So, I’m not a great cook. But I can clean wonderfully.”

“You’re a hoarder. Your house is packed with rocks and leaves you’ve collected because you thought they were pretty.” It was true. Will had only been there a few times, but after seeing the packed space the first time, he’d opted to wait outside the other times. Chaotic would be the only way to describe the place.

“But it’s an organized hoarding. I am a very organized hoarder,” Lo said, nodding once firmly, all seriousness.

It lasted only a moment before he was laughing again, moving to follow Will who shook his head and turned to follow the small foot trail home. It was no wider than the average foot, usually not allowing for more than one person at a time. But the grass that usually grew tall around it was dead, allowing for Lo to walk alongside him and annoy him, just ahead of the carrying stick. Will eyed the small space between Lo’s head and his stick, debating whether it was worth another trip back to the river.

“I know that sounds like a contradiction of terms, but it’s true,” Lo said, clasping his hands behind his back, a flounce to his steps. “I have everything sorted by location. That way I can always remember where I got it. It would be ridiculous to put them together by object. Then how would I be able to know which rock or leaf came from where? They’d just become one big jumble. No way to tell them apart. Now that would be true chaos.”

Will said nothing, his thoughts always miles away behind them, to the top of that mountain, drowning out whatever Lo was saying. It was causing chaos in town. It had been on all the townspeople's minds for months now. It seemed to swell with every passing day, the reality of their situation sitting heavy on all of them. The time for the semi-centennial ritual was coming up in less than a week now. The drawing of the name from the new generation would be in two days. Anyone under the age of fifty would be candidates.Tension sat thick in the village. Everyone's tempers were short. Will, who often found himself a target, had spent the last week mostly in the woods.

Sighing, Will tightened his grip on his carrying stick, aware if he wasn't careful he'd either wack Lo with it or dump water on him. He didn't want to have to fetch water again. Or listen to Lo's whining of being cold.

The mountain, now to his back, raised the hair on the back of his neck. He fought the urge to turn around and check for someone behind him every few feet. He always had this sensation when returning from getting water. Even Will's father, who had moved them to his village after his wife died, had spoken about the unsettling sensation he got from the mountain.

"Will, you listening?" Lo asked, giving him a strange look. He'd been calling his name for a while now, having noticed the almost sick look Will's skin had taken on. The same look had been on Will's face when Lo had first seen him, when he'd been staring at the mountain. "What's on your mind?"

Startling, Will glanced over to Lo, making eye contact for a brief moment before dropping his gaze to his feet. Making eye contact with Lo, the few times he had, always made him feel like he was about to get sucked into something he wasn't ready for. His boots were cracked and falling apart at the seams. He would need to get a new pair before next winter.

"Mm, just thinking," he finally answered, Lo's gaze leaving a prickling sensation on his skin. "I'm ready for spring to get here. I miss the flowers."

Lo jumped ahead of him, turning so he walked backwards, arms swinging wildly at his side. "Yeah, I know you like flowers. You always pick some and dry them for decoration. I don't think you can really knock me for my hoarding."

"At least I throw them out eventually. You keep everything," Will grumbled to his toes. He got enough ribbing from the other men in town when they caught him holding flowers. It was worse when he was younger. The whistling, catcalling, and crude nicknames had followed him, the other boys chasing him to his house. At the time, Will refused to leave his home during the day.

Now, though he got strange looks, no one said anything. They were too weary of him.

"Okay." Lo nodded, lips pursed, like he was suppressing a smile, but then the mirth left his face. "But, what were you actually thinking about? You're worried. You always get that ugly thing going on right here," Lo sang, suddenly closing the distance and poking Will between the brows. "Wrinkles. You shouldn't do that. It'll ruin your pretty face."

Will batted at him, but Lo was already jumping back, raising his hands in mock surrender as he grinned.

Will glared and then sighed, shaking his head. He shrugged, glancing up at him and then away, up to the birds still flying. They looked like they were floating. “How long have you lived here?”

Lo scrunched his nose, thinking. Will almost made a comment about wrinkles. “Just short of seven winters. Why? I mean, I’m flattered your thoughts are on me, but considering you look like you want to throw up, I actually don’t feel so flattered.”

Ignoring the jab, Will asked, “Do you go up the mountain?”

Lo stopped, eyes hardening on Will. His usually soft features were like stone, lips pressing into a hard line. The energy radiating from him went cold. It pulled Will up short, with only a few feet between them. “No. No one should ever go up that mountain. It’s cursed.”

Lo was almost never serious. And never had Will heard him so harsh. “Cursed? Did you hear that from the village?”

Lo shook his head, eyes rising above Will’s head to glare at the mountain behind them. “Nothing lives on it. No birds or mammals. They often can sense things that we as humans can’t, and they go out of their way to avoid it. Anything that causes that reaction in beasts is cursed.”

“Right,” Will muttered, scuffing the ground. Maybe it was why people steered clear of him. What was left of their animal instincts to tell them to. “Well, it’s said that something unholy lives on it.”

“Who said?”

Will shrugged. “The priest in our town has an old tome. It’s in a dead language so he can’t read much of it, but it tells a story of something getting trapped up there, and the ritual to renew the magic to keep it trapped.”

They only had pieces of the story, but there was a creature that feasted on humans with an insatiable hunger. And if it didn’t eat them, then it turned them to stone. It terrorized humans with its strenght and cunning, and no human had the ability to beat it. Its uncontrolled hunger worried the gods. Athena, the goddess of wisdom and war, is said to have tricked it into the mountain before cursing it, tying it to the mountain and sealing it away. But magic has a cost, so every fifty years it has to be given a new douse of energy to keep it strong enough to hold the creature.

Or at least, that is what the priest had told them from what he could read. There were large chunks of the text that neither he nor his predecessors could translate.

Lo tensed, eyes falling back on Will. “Ritual? What ritual?”

The expression Lo wore made him look older, reminding Will that even though he'd known him for a while, he didn't know a lot about the recluse. That constant energy, that had him always moving, freezing. Now he stood stock still as he stared down at Will. It made Will shift back, turning his neck so that Lo looked at his side profile.

"Every fifty years someone has to go up there to keep the magic in place." It was the kindest way of saying every fifty years, someone had to be a human sacrifice.

"That's ridiculous," Lo hissed, beginning to pace. His hair swayed back and forth, the gold strands bright even on a cloudy day. The color always made Will think of the sun. "That's a death sentence."

Will nodded, adjusting his grip on his stick. Even with years of hauling water, the weight of it never felt comfortable on his shoulders. When he first started doing this with his father, he complained about the stick cutting into his shoulders and the blisters on his hands. About how he didn't want to do this anymore. But one day, his dad rounded on him and hit him once, sending him to the ground, spilling the water all over himself.

When he'd looked up at his dad with wide eyes, all his father had said, "Which hurt more? Carrying your own weight, or being selfish and getting punished for your own greed?" He had then turned around and walked home, leaving Will to pick up the buckets and go back for more water on his own. It had been well past dark when Will returned home, eyes swollen and red, cheek already turning an ugly purple. His dad had already gone to bed.

They never talked about that day after, and Will stopped mentioning the discomfort.

"A sacrifice is needed to keep the magic strong. We keep it fair by drawing a name at random. Anyone under the age of fifty will have their name in there."

Lo's eyes blazed to life as he flipped around to stare at Will, realization dawning across his features. Then uncertainty darted across his face, his eyes shifting to the side, as he clearly debated on saying whatever he was thinking. His hands had balled into fists at his side, lips pressed so tightly together they'd gone white. But then he suddenly deflated, shoulders slumping and head tipping forward to pinch the bridge of his nose as he finally said, "Your name will be in it."

Something about the way he said it warmed Will a little. It was clear that the idea of Will's name getting pulled horrified him. He might be the only one who would truly be upset if Will's luck did run out. He would certainly be the only one to miss him. It was nice knowing there was somewhere out there who cared at least that much for him.

"Yep, along with over two dozen other people," Will said, voice quiet. It was a fate that had chased Will from his sleep, his nightmares growing worse as the ritual grew closer. Dark thoughts whispered in his ears in the dark hours of the early morning. "We all have a chance of our names being drawn."

Lo voiced those thoughts that plagued Will, his usually tan skin going almost grey, "You say the townspeople hate you. They could just pick you to get you out of their hair."

A breath rattled out of Will as he shook his head. His breath came out as a white cloud in front of him. The temperature was already dropping. It wouldn't be long now before the storm hit.

He couldn't let himself think like that, to believe he was really that hated by everyone. While he didn't always get along with many of the townsfolk, neither had he done anything to earn that level of hate. This was fate no one wished on anyone, even an outcast like Will. "I never said they hated me. I'm just different from them. And it's random. They put everyone's name in a bowl and draw from it. They can't just pick someone."

Or they weren't supposed to. But Will wasn't ignorant about people, as much as he wanted to believe that most people were basically good. He knew them better than anyone else because of his gift. Or his curse, however one wanted to look at it. He tended to feel as if it were a curse. But, he knew what people were truly capable of because of it. He could only hope that they wouldn't since it was considered a taboo, and no one wanted to risk the ritual not working.

Lo eyed him, clearly seeing the doubt on his face, but Will turned away, turning his gaze back to the mountain. It stood, nameless behind them, pressing down on them.

"Just be careful," Lo finally said, clearly sensing that Will was done talking about this. He moved to stand behind Will, his own gaze sharp on the mountain. "You're different from them. People always fear those who are different."

The Choosing

Chapter Summary

Bev stops for a visit and Will has to put up with Chilton during the ritual

Chapter Notes

You ever get a word that the longer you look at it, the weirder it gets? Happened to me writing this chapter. It's the word 'which.' The longer I look at that word, the less I believe I actually spelled it right. Or can believe it's an actual word. Anyone else suffer the same problem? Like there are just some words you find odd for no reason at all.

Not beta read

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The village was small, a cluster of homes with the dominating building being the temple, though the temple was small in comparison to most. The local bar worked as the town's only restaurant and inn, for when they got the rare visitor. It had been over a year since the last one had wandered in.

There was a single road that cut through coming from the south and heading straight for the mountain.

Will's home sat a little outside of the village, closer to the mountain and obscured by the trees. When his father brought them here, there hadn't been any vacant buildings, and no one had wanted to sell the strangers land. The mountain and the lack of visitors made the town suspicious of new faces. His father suffered from their deep mistrust till he died.

Will was still one of the first suspected when something went wrong. But, that had little to do with him being a stranger.

His father had bought the unclaimed land nearer to the mountain anyone else wanted and built their home there from the temple. It was small, but it worked for them. Now that Will's father was gone, anything larger would have been too much work to maintain.

Stomping the mud from his boots, Will pushed his door open, his string of fish having already been gutted down by the river. He didn't want to risk drawing bears to the village by gutting them near it. Lo had left him there, waving at him, heading deeper into the woods to check his traps. He doubted he'd see him again before the Choosing.

Glancing over, he saw the fire in his fireplace was burning low, almost out. He needed to add more before it went out completely. The stones of the fireplace were mostly black, soot having slowly gathered on them throughout the years of use. The only rug in his home was laid in front of it, for the nights he needed to fight off the chills and slept by the fire.

Animal furs draped the few chairs he had, and dried flowers sat on the table that was only big enough for two. No other decoration dotted his home. He didn't have the money for it. And there was no one here to appreciate it anyways.

Laying the fish on the counter, Will's thoughts wandered off as he started prepping them for dinner. This chilled, he wanted a soup to help warm him up. His fingers moved mindlessly as his thoughts turned to the future. In five days, the Fates would weave his future for him. The anxiety had been simmering in his gut for the last week, and Lo's words had only stirred it up.

Will knew he wasn't well liked. Not by everyone. He knew this, though it had never bothered him as much as it did now.

Just as he was turning to start the fire, someone knocked on his door.

Pausing, Will set the herbs he'd been crushing down. Opening the door, he found Bev there, holding a basket in her hands. Her dark cloak was wrapped tight around her, her hood up to hide her dark hair. Seeing Will, she gave him a broad smile, lifting the basket to shake it at him, "Hiya, Will. Was wondering if you'd be up for a trade?"

This close to spring, when animals and vegetation were still scarce, it wasn't uncommon for some of the townsfolk to offer trades with him. Food for things they had available. It was typically Bev and Bella who ended up on his doorstep, the only one's brave enough. Or maybe it was because they just didn't let their pride get in the way.

Bella didn't mind because she cared about him. She cared about everyone though. It was what made her such a good healer. Bev, on the other hand, was harder to read for him even when she wore her emotions on her sleeves. She was probably the only other person in the village who could understand the feeling of exclusion Will felt. Her features marked her as a foreigner, even with her family having lived here for generations. It meant that she was right up there on people's lists to suspect when something didn't go right. Which made Will grateful she had her husband Lucas.

Will could take care of himself, and people were less inclined to do anything to a full grown male. With a female on the other hand, they were more likely to push their luck.

Wiping his hands on his pants, Will leaned against the doorframe, eyes cast down to Bev's boots. They were new. Lucas was a carpenter and made good money off it. Mostly because he was the only one, and had no plans on passing the trade on to anyone but his offspring. He was also massive. No one was going to try messing with Bev because they didn't want to mess with him. They all knew how he doted on her. He was completely smitten with the carefree, all laughs woman.

“Hi Bev,” Will said, letting his door close behind him. He never allowed anyone in his home. Most he didn’t trust, and for Bev and Bella, it was because he didn’t want any rumors starting up about them. He certainly didn’t want either Jack or Lucas to come chasing him down. For Lo, the man never came near the village unless he had to. “How’s Lucas?”

“Well enough to be eating me out of house and home,” she said, wrinkling her nose in mock annoyance. She was just as in love with him, as he was with her, even if she wasn't as open with it. Will could read it on her. “If I had known I was marrying a bear who just never hibernated, I would have turned him down when he asked to court me. Trying to keep enough food in the house for him is like trying to keep the wood-shavings out of our home.”

“Impossible?” Will asked, raising an eyebrow even as a smile curled his lip.

Bev gave a harsh nod. “Absolutely,” she said, adjusting the basket to bring his attention back to it. “So, you wanna be my hero and save me from starving to death? Or should I start trying to dig my own grave?”

Will huffed a laugh, shaking his head. “I think I can spare some fish for you two. I’ve got some dried in the back, if you don't mind them not being fresh.”

Bev beamed at him. “Hey, beggars can’t be choosers. I’ll eat almost anything over starving to death. Other than snakes," she amended, a shutter running through her. "I hate snakes.”

Stepping off his steps, Will moved around his home, Bev trailing behind him. “What about spiders? I figured you’d eat a snake over a spider."

There was snort behind him. “Are you kidding? A spider’s so small I could swallow it in one bite and pretend it was a bad dream. A snake would be chewy. Like eating a worm.”

She pretended to gag at the thought, and Will hummed in thought. Living as he did, Will had just about eaten everything. Including snakes. Though, he'd never eaten a spider. Bev was right when she talked about their size. There just wasn’t enough of them, in number or size, for him to bother.

“What if you slurped it down? Like a noodle? That might not be so bad,” Will said as his smoke house came into view, his voice dropping to keep it solemn.

Bev narrowed her eyes at him, trying to decide how serious he was. She could almost feel the subtle humor rolling off him, even with his back to her. She knew about his quirky and dry sense of humor, though it only ever came out when it was just them. In town, he was too reserved for any of it to show. He was always too aware of others watching him. And even if it was just her and Lucas, he tended to be more shut off. Respectful, but aloof.

It was times like these that reminded her just how unfair people were to him.

“You think you're hilarious, don’t you?” she asked as Will opened the door to his smokehouse for her. It was where he tended to treat and store his meat. He felt like he was asking for trouble if he kept it all in his house. She stopped in front of him, looking up at him, but his

eyes were down, staring at her boots again. She could never decide if he was too anxious to meet her gaze, or if it was out of politeness he didn't. "A regular jester."

Straightface, Will quirked an eyebrow at her, eyes lifting just enough to reach the bottom button of her cloak. "Not at all. I was just making a suggestion. In case you wanted an alternative to digging your own grave. The ground tends to be frozen this time of year. It would be a lot of work to dig it now."

She huffed, adjusting her cloak. "Sure, in that case, I'd have Lucas do it. It would be his fault anyways," Bev said, turning her attention to the inside of the smokehouse. It certainly wasn't as full as it usually was, but it was fuller than it had been in previous years. This winter hadn't been as hard on him. "Lucas gave me some tools to give to you. He figured some of yours would need replacing soon."

Will took the basket, popping it open to see a variety of tools. Hammar, nails, small hand saw, along with some other smaller tools. He nodded, stepping in the shed to put the tools on his work table. Bev waited by the door. It wasn't the fear of him that kept her from walking in. It was because she was just as aware of what could happen to him if they were in a room alone as he was.

Once the basket was empty, Will reached up and pulled down two strings of dried fish, shoving them into the basket, even as Bev objected, "Will —wait. We don't need all that—"

But he was walking out, pushing the basket into her hands. "It's fine Bev. Spring will be here soon. I don't need to be as tight with my rations now. Besides, as you said, your husband likes to eat you out of house and home. And since snakes are clearly off the table, you obviously need the fish more than I do."

Again, the dry humor came through, making Bev smile up at him, even when he turned away to close the door. "Thanks Will."

He waved it off as they headed back to the front of his house. He didn't mind sharing with them. Bev had always been nice and Lucas had never been mean. He wanted to help if he could.

"Bella talked about coming to see you soon," Bev said suddenly when they reached his steps. A gust of wind ran through, yanking her hood off. Her black hair tumbled free, snapping around her face. She grumbled as she reached up to pull her hood back up and stuff her hair into it. "Not for food. Just to check-in. She worries about you."

Will shoved his hands in his pockets, scuffing his boots. "She'll have more to worry about if she keeps checking on me. Jack will get jealous and that never ends well for whoever is on the receiving end."

Bev gave him an exasperated look. Shaking her head, she said, "Jack knows better than that."

"Jack," Will said, mind tumbling back to his childhood, to bleeding knuckles and bruised faces, "tends to act first and ask questions later. If someone tells him I'm making moves on his wife, he'll be out here wringing my neck before I can say otherwise."

“And then his wife would remove his manhood,” Bev said with complete certainty. Being a healer, there were many things Bella could do that should frighten people, but her warm personality tended to keep that from happening.

“I’ll still be dead.”

She huffed a sigh, but didn’t refute the point. Instead she said, “She’ll come anyway. So you might as well just accept that.”

Will looked up from the ground, to the mountain. More and more, his thoughts kept turning to it. “Well, Jack can only get me I suppose if the monster on the mountain doesn’t.”

Bev didn’t even glance at the mountain. Her name would be in the bowl too, as would her husband’s. She had been one of the few people to never fear the mountain. Not in the same way the other townsfolk did. She respected it, but she didn’t cower under it. Bella had much of the same response Will had found throughout their sporadic conversations.

“It’s unlikely your name will get pulled, so I suggest you prepare for Jack,” she said, watching the trees shake from the wind. “He’s the bigger threat to your life.”

“Someone’s name has to be pulled.”

“I’m hoping it’s Mason.”

Will glanced at her, before going back to looking at the mountain. The Verger’s had two kids, Mason and Margot. Margot was the quiet one, almost never seen outside. And when she was, Mason was always by her side.

Mason, on the other hand, was loud and brash. He’d been one of Will’s main tormentors when they were kids. His parents being one of the wealthiest in the village made most people turn their heads the other way when he did something questionable. They didn’t want to earn the wrath of his parents, or give them a reason to not help them if they needed it in the future.

Mason had tormented Bev for a long time too. Her features had been too different for him to leave alone. He’d messed with her until the day she laid him flat on his ass and broke his nose. Then he’d kept his distance, though he always watched her. After she married Lucas, he’d left her alone completely. No amount of money could bring him back if Lucas killed him.

“I doubt the Fates will be that kind,” Will huffed a laugh, rubbing his nose. “His kind always live the longest. You know that. Can’t kill cockroaches that easily.”

She laughed, but fell silent as she caught Will’s expression. “And you have a one in a thousand chance of it being you,” Bev said, brushing off his words. If she held any fear of being drawn, she didn’t show it. She treated the whole thing as more of an inconvenience than a death sentence that hung over everyone.

“The odds aren’t that slim,” Will said, sighing heavily. Her optimism never failed to amaze him.

She harrumphed, shifting the basket. “There’s no point in worrying about something you can’t change or prepare for.” Bev paused, looking at Will. She could understand why he would be more concerned about it than she would. “You know it’s taboo to mess with the Choosing. It has to be random. Chilton knows that.”

He nodded, eyes still on the mountain. She was right. But Will couldn’t stop the doubt from eating away at him either.

Chilton, the priest of the temple, would be overseeing this Choosing. He was older than Will, closer to thirty. He’d always shown a keen interest in Will, enough so that Will had always given him a wide berth if he could. For a long time, Chilton had wanted to test Will to see if he was an Oracle. Oracles were rare, and typically female, but they were highly valuable.

It would have meant that Will would have been taken from his home and locked in a secluded room in the temple, only being brought out when someone wanted a prophecy. While he was generally disliked by most people, at least he had his freedom.

Chilton never really stopped wanting to have him tested, Will just got better at avoiding him. Now though, there’d be no avoiding the man.

The days slipped through Will’s fingers quickly. Even when a lethargy set in his veins, slowing everything in his life down, time continued to pick up speed. He’d spent most of the last few days either staring at the mountain or avoiding looking at it completely.

Now, the day of the Choosing had arrived, and Will wasn’t sure where time had gone.

The storm he’d feared would bring ice again had passed without incident. No ice, but no rain either.

Stepping outside his home, Will found it a clear day, the sun warming his skin as it peeked over the trees. Breathing deep, he let the warm air fill his lungs, settling his nerves. He’d been right about Lo though. He hadn’t seen him since the day by the river. A part of him wished he’d said goodbye the last time. But it’d felt too permanent then. Not to mention, it had felt like he was tempting the Fates.

Walking into town, he passed many of the homes. Most of them were built around the temple, making it the center of town. There was the superstition that the closer you lived to an area of worship, the more protection from evil you had. Will’s father had never put stock in it, but it was clear that the generations of people who’d settled here before had. All their doors even faced in the direction of the temple.

Will’s door faced the mountain.

As he drew closer to the center of town, he found he wasn't the only one up. Many of the townsfolk were already outside, standing around and talking in small groups. Some ignored him, but others eyed him closely, expressions settling between distaste or unnerved. Will noted that those whose names wouldn't be in the bowl weren't outside, though he doubted they were asleep.

Most people were already beginning to congregate around the temple, a brass bowl already set on a pedestal in front of the pillars. Will knew it already had slips of paper in it. The members of the temple were the ones who wrote out the names. It'd been that way for ages, as a way to try and keep the drawing fair. It kept people from substituting other people's names for their own. It also meant that they didn't have to worry about those who were illiterate.

Like Will. His father had been able to read and write, but thought it was a pointless skill for his son to know.

The temple was one of the few buildings made of stone. Its pillars reached skyward, acting as guards to a large set of double doors. The stone was an offwhite, making the wood doors look darker. Statues of Apollo and Zeus sat on either side of the doors, with Apollo wielding his bow and Zeus his lightning. Symbols of Athena were also etched into the stone, but no statue of her was represented.

People milled about, unsure what to do as they waited for the ritual to begin. It wouldn't be long though, not with everyone already present.

As Will walked up, he saw Mason and his group standing near the steps of the temple. Randall and Tobias stood on either side of him, all of them eyeing the people around them. Their predatory gazes always gave Will the feeling of them being wolves who watched the sheep, waiting for a moment of weakness to strike. They nudged each other, nodding to individuals who looked more shaken than others. They'd whisper something that caused laughter from the others.

Mason leered at a young girl who passed by, causing her to skitter away, almost tripping over her cloak.

Margot stood almost directly behind him. Will caught a glimpse of her as Mason pretended to dart forward to grab the girl, who practically ran to her parents. Margot's hair hung loose around her face, her expression completely blank as she stood there. She didn't wear a cloak to fight off the chill of the morning, unlike her brother.

Her eyes stared unseeing into the trees. There was no worry on her, no dread or fear of what was to come. Even Mason showed some nerves for the Choosing.

Will could only guess what kind of life she'd lived to be completely at ease with the possibility of death sitting over her. Even Will, whose life hadn't been easy, worried. Though, with Mason as her brother, Will could gather a pretty good idea of what her life was like.

A movement of white caught his attention. Bella stood in the crowd, speaking quietly to someone who had their back to him. Her white cloak was bulky and striking against her dark

complexion. It was what caught his attention. She was practically swaddled in it. Which told Will that Jack had a hand in it. He tended to be overzealous when it came to her. Her hair was pulled up, small clips of flowers decorating it, meant to keep it out of her face as she worked.

She was one of the few whose name was not in the bowl. As the only healer, she was exempt. Much like Chilton was because he was the head priest of the temple. A basket hung over one of her arms, full of bread. She was handing it to those who wanted it.

Spotting Will, she excused herself. The woman she was speaking to turned to see what had caught her attention. It was Alana Bloom, a dark haired, porcelain skinned woman who at one point Will had been interested in. She'd been polite most of the time when they happened to talk, but distant. Not like Bev or Bella. It became clear to him that she had no interest in him, or would ever have interest in him. So he'd left her alone, not wanting to make her uncomfortable.

Evaluating the sharp way Alana watched Bella's back, Will thought back to the rumors that had been surrounding them for a while. People said that she'd been trying to become Bella's apprentice for a few winters now. And now there were rumors that Bella planned to accept it, though it had yet to be seen. But it was clear that Alana did in fact want to become her apprentice, even if Will could see that it wasn't for the same reasons that Bella had become a healer.

Will hung around the edge of the crowd, dipping his head in greeting when Bella stopped in front of him.

She smiled softly at him, dark eyes warm as she looked at Will. "Hello William. How have you been?"

Will shrugged, looking at the basket of bread. "Well enough. I've heard you've been sick though," he said, eyes darting up to take in her face again. She looked tired more than anything. But he noted how her posture sagged a little, rather than the regal one she typically had. She also seemed to have trouble holding the basket more than she usually would have.

There'd been talk that she'd been sick. Which was why people were saying that she was going to accept Alana as an apprentice. But she had never confirmed anything. And Will never said anything about what he could see from her. He wouldn't betray her like that.

She laughed, shaking her head. "Just a cough, nothing to worry about. You know I don't fare well in the winter."

He nodded once. She always tended to get a cough when it got cold, but they both knew this was different.

Instead, Will shifted the conversation. "You know if you keep stopping to make sure I'm okay, you'll have to stop by to heal me from your husband's wrath and make me okay."

She laughed, handing him a piece of bread. He took it more out of politeness than necessity. He didn't feel hungry, hadn't since yesterday morning. He supposed he'd be ravenous after

all this was over. But for now, he just felt nerves. He hadn't slept well either. He'd spent most of last night sitting on his steps, staring up at the stars.

The dark circles that lined the bottom of his eyes spoke to that, and Bella saw it.

Stepping closer, she lowered her voice, as she asked, "Do you need something to help you sleep?" Her voice was soft enough that no one would overhear unless they were standing right next to them. She was not blind to the treatment he suffered from others, and she didn't want to add to it. She'd already spotted Mason and his friends. "I could whip you up a tonic before you go home. And some salve for your hands." She'd seen the cracked skin when he'd taken the bread from her. He was one of the few people who never came to see her unless he was desperate and could offer something in return. It was why she'd taken to leaving things on his doorstep on occasions while he was out.

Will shook his head, lifting his gaze to her shoulder. He gave her a half smile, tucking his hands under his cloak so she couldn't see them. "No need. I'll sleep fine once this is all over."

She nodded, but pursed her lips, clearly unhappy with his refusal. She shifted so they could both see the temple, and the bowl that sat in front of it.

"Are you worried?" she asked quietly, looking to the bowl rather than at Will, who gave her a one shoulder shrug.

"Probably no more than you are," he said, eyeing the crowd as he ran a hand through his curls. They stuck up at odd angles from the movement.

It was a half truth. While she didn't have to fear for herself, she did fear for Jack. He was just under the age cap, so his name was also in the bowl. But he doubted if she was as worried as Will was. He always saw the darker parts of people, while she tried to see only the good. It was probably why she was as kind to him as she was.

Before she could say anything else, the doors to the temple opened. Chilton walked out with a few of his apostles flanking him, their heads bowed low, hoods up to obscure their faces. He wore ceremonial robes of white and gold, the emblem of Zeus sewn onto them. His beard was trimmed, with his hair slicked back. He tried to look regal, though Will always found him to be a sad representation when he stood next to Bella.

His dark eyes took in the crowd as he stood in front of the bowl. Even from the edge of the crowd, Will could see the pleasure he took in his position. He loved being the center of everyone's attention, loved being the one they looked to for answers. Loved talking more than he should.

Maybe that was another reason he couldn't stand the priest.

Raising his hands, palms up to the heavens, Chilton lifted his voice so that it carried through the town. "Zeus, oh mighty god of the heavens, see the sacrifice we give today and answer our prayers to keep the monster you and yours put away locked up. Let it never find freedom and continue to suffer the benevolent punishment you bestowed upon it for its crimes all

those years ago. Apollo, hear our prayers, and bring us your light to chase away the things that prowl in the dark."

His voice rang, echoing between the homes. Will watched the expression of the townsfolk instead of Chilton's poor pitous performance. Trepidation and awe were the ranges of the expressions. Many nodded along with Chiltons words.

A hand landed lightly on his shoulder, causing Will to flinch. Turning, Bella gave him one more soft family, her hand squeezing lightly, before she walked off, leaving him alone. Jack had arrived, arms crossed as he glared up at Chilton. He was a large man whose presence tended to subdue others, which made him a good pick for Mayor most of the time. Those around him shifted to give him more space. Will was sure they hadn't even realized they'd done it.

Will watched as his severe expression softened when he saw Bella approaching him. He held one hand out, her own finding its place in it. She stopped next to him, their eyes locked on one another's as they had a quiet conversation.

Giving them privacy, Will turned his eyes away, back to the temple, where Chilton was still talking.

Chilton was still looking over the people, face soft, smile wide. He placed a hand over his heart. "I know your fears. I know your worries. But fear not. Know that your sacrifice is for the good of everyone here. Even should the Fates deal you a hand you dread, rest assured that with your selfless sacrifice, your giving heart, is the sole reason that our home can continue to grow and prosper. Without you, we would fall into fear and despair. You are essential to us. You are not useless. You are not being thrown away. You are not unwanted. You are our salvation."

Many people were enraptured by his words. Some were crying softly as they were sure it was their name that would be pulled. Bev and Lucas stood near the outside of the crowd, neither looking very impressed with Chilton's performance. Bev never liked the priest, and her expression did nothing to hide those feelings. Lucas, completely head over heels for his wife, tended to mirror her opinions. Will had to fight to keep the smile off his face when Chilton looked quickly away from Bev and her evil eye.

Will crossed his arms, tilting his head up to the sky before his gaze slid to the mountain.

If this thing was so terrible, Will found himself wondering why the people remained here. There was little outside trade. The town, while it wasn't fading out, was neither growing larger or more prosperous. It was, overall, stagnant. Neither moving forward, nor back.

Then again, he could have left any time after his father died, and yet had remained here anyways. Even with the snide remarks and brusque manners he suffered. Something always kept him from packing up and leaving. Probably the realization that it wouldn't matter where he went, people would always dislike him. And it was better with the devil you knew.

Sighing, Will turned his attention back to Chilton, whose head was thrown back to look to the heavens, chanting in the old language. His arms were still upraised, much like he was in the

throes of ecstasy. He probably was with the amount of attention he was getting from this.

His apostles remained with their heads bowed, but they chanted too. Their voices remained low, just above murmur so that their voices didn't overpower Chilton's.

Falling silent, Chilton remained looking upward for a while, slowly lowering his head and hands. He was savoring. Will swallowed the urge to snort at his antics.

Finally looking at the crowd again, Chilton smiled at them again as his hands rested on the edge of the bowl. The crowd shifted forward, drawing closer as they sensed the time approaching. Tension ran thick in the air. Will remained unmoved, his heart thundering in his chest, fingers tightening around the piece of bread he'd forgotten he held. Mason threw an arm around Margot, pulling her close as he watched Chilton, much like a child watches a bug trapped in a jar.

"As we now choose our savior," Chilton said, his voice lowering so that people move even closer, afraid to miss something, "I ask for silence in reverence of their sacrifice. What awaits them will not be easy, but let them embrace what the Fates have ordained for them. Let them go bravely and face their destiny. And let us, those they save, remember them for the heroes they are."

Murmurs of prayers ran through the crowd, prayers of salvation and mercy, as Chilton dipped one hand into the bowl, his eyes closed, head tilted up slightly.

Withdrawing a single slip of paper, Chilton opened his eyes and peered at it, eyes widening briefly before he composed himself again. Whatever name had been drawn, he hadn't expected it. Will shifted forward, trying to get a better read. But the priest had his pious expression back in place.

No one breathed as Chilton looked up from the slip, face solemn, taking a deep breath. It was the quiet before the storm.

"William Graham," he said, Will's name rippling through the crowd like a shockwave. "Let me be the first to offer my most sincere and deepest gratitude for being our savior. To you, I bow my head in thanks."

Chilton did, in fact, bow his head towards Will, while everyone else spun to look at him. Both Bev and Bella looked at him in horror, while many looked at him in relief.

Will stood frozen. His stomach had dropped, and the vague need to throw up simmered in it.

No one said anything, silence ringing through the town, till Mason exploded in laughter.

~TBC~

Chapter End Notes

I honestly absolutely love both Bev and Bella in the serious. So sad about their endings. Though it's pretty typical for the characters I like to die. I don't know how many books I've read where that's happened. I should just stop liking characters if I want them to survive.

And Chilton is just so easy to hate.

Going in Blind

Chapter Summary

Chilton stops by.

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry this took so long to update. I had some personal things (both good and bad) happen that caused the delay. But here it is!

Not beta read.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will had the day to get his affairs in order.

It wasn't that he had anything to take care of, it was just standard procedure. He had no steady job to close down. He had no apprentice to leave final instructions with. He had no family to say goodbye to. His house would probably remain vacant, so he saw no need to clean it. He was sure Mayor Crawford would see to the handling of the meat in his smokehouse. Bella or Bev would more than likely take care of the things in his house.

No one would want to move in it though. The door didn't face the temple.

Sitting on his bed, Will stared down at his hands, unsure what to do. Tomorrow morning, men would come to escort him up the mountain. It was less to protect him from the beasts in the woods and more to make sure he didn't take off at the last second. He was honestly surprised that acolytes hadn't been placed around his home to keep an eye on him. It sounded like something Chilton would do.

In fact, they probably had. Will hadn't stayed after his name had been announced. He'd turned and left, Mason's laugh chasing him. He'd slammed his door shut behind him. He hadn't wanted to see their faces. The relief, the smugness, or the horror.

The Fates were playing a joke on him.

Glancing around, he found that nothing had changed in his time gone. It looked like it would on any morning. There wasn't anything on the walls. He didn't have the money for something like that. The blankets on his bed were wadded at the end, the only evidence of a night that had gotten little sleep. An abandoned sketch book sat on his dresser. The only gift

his father had ever given him, and one he hadn't touched in years.nA bear pelt stretched across his floor in an attempt to keep his feet warm in the winter. Lo had given it to him a little less than a year ago after Will had commented on the rug he'd seen in Lo's house.

It felt wrong for everything to still look the same.

He looked to his floor, where his few extra pairs of clothing were strewn across, waiting to be washed. That had been his plan for today after the Ritual. It was always a lot of work to wash clothes. And he only had a limited amount of soap, so he liked to use it sparingly, but he was really beginning to get a little ripe. He'd planned on that and to tend to the roof. He'd noticed a few areas that could invite a leak when the spring rains finally did hit.

Looking at the bear rug, Will felt a pang of guilt. He should give it back to Lo, but there was no time. If he went to his home, it would cause panic. And more than likely the townsfolk would chase him down and haul him back before he got twenty feet into the woods. They weren't likely to believe he would return. They already didn't trust him.

The rug would stay until someone claimed it for themselves. He suspected the Vergers, Chilton, or Jack would end up with it. A part of him wanted to burn it just to keep any of them from getting it. Though, he supposed if it helped Bella any, he wouldn't mind Jack getting it.

It was also possible that Bev would take it if she and Bella ended up picking up his place. She could at least trade it for food next early spring when Lucas had finished eating their food. He hoped she was pragmatic enough to think of that, rather than let her sentiments for him stop her. He suspected that wouldn't be a problem for her. She was one of the only ones who traded with him when her food supply ran low.

A knock on his door pulled him from his musing.

He didn't move at first, staring out his bedroom door. It took a minute for his brain to register that there was someone even at his door.

Standing, he went to his door, opening it to find one of the last people he wanted to see.

Chilton was still dressed in his ceremonial robes, the gold hems catching the sunlight, a large tome held against his chest. His acolytes stood behind him, their back to Will. Their robes were a dull grey, with no designs or gold trim. They stood with their hands folded in front of them, looking towards the temple. They were to be neither seen nor heard, just helpful.

"Mr. Graham," Chilton said, inclining his head slightly. "If I might take some of your time, I would like to speak to you about what to expect for tomorrow?"

Will crossed his arms, leaning against the doorway. "You mean other than getting eaten?"

Will had never been well liked, and he'd tried to watch his words for the most part. Pissing people off wouldn't help anything. But, the fact he was going to die tomorrow seemed to have thrown that idea out the window. His mind had been filled with blood and crunching bone for the last few hours.

He watched disdain wrinkle Chilton's brow momentarily before smoothing out. Not many were good at masking their expression around him, but the Head Priest didn't seem to bother. The acolytes shifted, unused to disrespect shown to one of high standing. Or maybe it was just the lack of humility. High Priests were regarded with respect for the most part. Treated with honor. Maybe if Will felt like Chilton deserved it, he would.

Chilton looked down at Will, something impressive since he was standing below him. "There are traditions that need to be upheld. We need to go over the proceedings for tomorrow to ensure they are."

Even his tone was condescending. Will debated shutting the door in his face.

Chilton's followers shifted, reminding Will of his position. It didn't matter what he wanted. He was expected to fulfill certain roles, and he would be forced to by the others if he didn't.

Running a hand through his hair, Will sighed, glancing down at Chilton's face before nodding. He stepped back, opening his door further. The others didn't move as the Head Priest walked up the steps, moving further in to let Will shut the door behind him.

His home felt dark and cramped with Chilton standing in the middle of it, his robes almost obscenely white amongst the shadows. His room felt even smaller with how strongly Chitlon smelled. As the Head Priest, he often bathed in perfumed water in the name of cleansing his soul, but the scents tended to be overpowering. He watched the priest look around, taking in the minimal decorations. When Chilton looked back at him, Will gestured to the table, the only real space for them to sit comfortably to talk. The only other person who had sat at it was his father. Most meals had been eaten in silence, neither looking at the other. What conversations they did have were practical. They talked about what needed to be done before winter. Or what things around their house needed to be fixed. Or if there'd been a predator lurking around the woods to look out for. He'd never thought of his father as a bad one. It was just after losing his mom, his dad hadn't had any room left in his heart for anything else. Even Will.

Will took his seat, leaning back as he watched Chilton take the seat his father had sat in for years. The priest's nose twitched as he took his seat opposite of him. It was clear he had no desire to be in his home, and found everything about it to be below him. Not that it was surprising.

Will looked down at the tomb as Chilton laid it on the table, slowly peeling the cover open and flipping through it. There was no telling how old it was. The pages were darkened with time, many of the pages ripped around the edges. It had been rebinded a few times, the pages barely hanging on.

Will's fingers twitched with the desire to touch it. He'd never touched a book before. Living in a small town meant they were a rarity, and being poor meant he could afford it. The fact he was illiterate meant that wasting money on one was foolish. He wouldn't be able to do anything with it even if did get it. The only good it would be is to work as fire started in the winter once he ran out of kindling.

It looked soft. He wondered if it would feel something like rabbit fur.

“Tomorrow,” Chilton started, pulling Will out of his musings, “you’ll leave before dawn. You’ll want to be at the site before the sun rises.”

Will crossed his arms, staring at the book. “Why? I don’t think the creature will care when I show up since I’m the reason it’ll be stuck there.”

“It is to be done in the dark. There is to be no godly witness.”

“Gods can’t see in the dark?”

“Apollo brings light to everything, but there is no light to be brought to this beast. No acknowledgement or recognition,” Chilton said severely, hands pressing down on the book. He’d paused on a page full of illustrations. From his angle, he could see figures at the top of the page and some at the bottom. It took a minute to realize the figures at the top were standing on clouds. They were likely gods. Before Will could get a better look at the figures at the bottom, Chilton flipped the page.

“There are some things too disgusting to bring light to.”

Will looked up at the priest’s face, finding him staring at Will. His eyes weren’t cold like most people’s were when they looked at him. They were ablaze with curiosity and interest. And regret. He regretted sending Will off, but had no intention of stopping it. Will had the image of being a lightning bug caught in the glass jar of a child, leaving him subject to the harsh shaking of the glass or random poking of a finger.

Swallowing hard, Will fought to keep his words steady as he said, “Usually keeping things in the dark denotes shame. Not disgust.”

Chilton waved him off. “It’s the same thing.”

“No, it’s not,” Will said, crossing his arms. His dad had been ashamed of him, but the villagers had only ever been disgusted. “Shame is brought on because *you* feel a connection with the object. You feel like it reflects on you in some way. Disgust is when you feel no connection with it. It has nothing to do with you, but you still find it unpleasant, so you avoid it. You don’t hide it. You hide shame.”

Chilton pursed his lips, fingers running aimlessly over the pages. His pale eyes took Will in, watching the man’s eyes follow his hands. He’d get brief flashes as startling blue eyes before they’d drop back down. Eyes so blue it was as if Poseidon himself dropped pieces of the ocean into them when the young man was born. Chilton had always found him fascinating, but Fate had taken away his chance with getting closer to him. “That is neither here nor there. What matters is that we follow what we’ve been told to do. Men from the village will come and get you tomorrow, before the sun rises, and escort you to the cave.”

Will huffed. Escort was such a kind word for what they were doing. More like hogtie him and haul him up as they would a pig for slaughter.

Chilton didn’t stand, but continued to run his hands over the book. It was a nervous tick. Will looked up, catching the tightened mouth and pinch brows.

There was another reason the priest was here, and it was something he no doubt would find unpleasant. It was probably the real reason he'd bothered to come out to his house.

"Is there something else?" Will asked when it became clear that the priest was going to take forever to say something. He wanted this man out of his house. All he wanted was to go back to his room and lay down for a bit.

Chilton's lips twisted, fingers spasming on the book. "Unfortunately," he said slowly, his expression becoming calm. "There are many in the village who have expressed concerns about you being the sacrifice."

Will snorted at the thought. It was unlikely that any of them cared enough about him to be concerned.

"I'm assuming their concern is not for me, but about me."

Chilton nodded, hands folding together on the book. Not a stray hair moved out of place from the movement. Will wondered how much oil had been used to keep it that still. "I'm afraid so. They fear you will bring the wrath of the beast down on the village."

Will hummed, rising to walk to his sink and lean against it. He didn't like being near Chilton for long periods of time. The scented oils he bathed in overwhelmed him. Having some space to breathe let him think more clearly. Bracing his hands against the edge of the sink, Will titled his head as he looked at the priest. "And why would they fear that?"

"Your eyes."

Will blinked a few times, unsure how to take that. He leaned further back, hands gripping the side of the sink so tightly his knuckles turned white. His eyes had always been a rather common topic around the village. He'd inherited them from his father, along with his dark curls. He'd always been told they were a startling blue, but also been told how pretty they were when he bothered to look someone in the face. Bella had told him on numerous occasions how pretty his eyes were. But people also didn't like them because of how much he could *see.* Just by looking at someone who knew things about them most didn't realize. And by looking them in the eye, the eyes really did become windows to the soul for him. And there were many things people didn't want known about them.

Especially by someone like Will.

"My eyes?" Will asked dumbly. He would have thought they would have been out celebrating the fact they were about to get rid of him and his eyes. Not bothering Chilton about them.

"Mr. Graham, your eyes have been rumored to see more than a normal person's," Chilton stated, trying to get Will to look at him. His tone was almost whittling, a pitchy wind in his ears. "They believe that by looking at the beast and seeing more than it would want, you may encourage its wrath and it will have consequences for the village."

"Isn't the reason I'm going so that it can't?"

A sick sensation has crawled its way into his stomach. He knew where this would go, and the possibilities of how this conversation would end were not good. Images of his own face blinked through his mind, eyes sightless, sockets empty. Blood dripped down his face from what was taken.

“Mr. Graham, you must understand, creatures such as these are powerful and uncontrollable, though they gods have tried their best,” Chitlon said, rising from his seat and shutting the tome. His tone had grown hard, eyes cooling as they stared at each other. Something dark and ugly unfurled in Will’s chest, making his eyes flash. “Should you anger it, it might not bother to accept you as a sacrifice but come straight for those it blames. The end would be disastrous for all involved.”

Will lifted his chin, refusing to be cowed, his fingers tightening on the sink. If they sensed weakness, they would take him for all he was worth. Even if he was going to die, he didn’t want to be tortured before that. “There’s nothing I can do about that.”

“Which is why you are to be blindfolded.”

While it wasn’t the worst outcome, something in Will revolted at the idea of not meeting his fate headon. The idea of going blind and fumbling like a lost lamb made him want to roar his refusal. Hogs weren’t blindfolded when they were taken for slaughter. He didn’t want to be either. He wanted to know what he was dying for.

The refusal must have shown on Will’s face, because Chilton said, “This is not up for debate Mr. Graham. You will be blindfolded tomorrow for the greater good of the village. Don’t waste your sacrifice because of your own selfishness.”

His words were like a battering ram, shoving what was growing behind Will’s ribcage down, making it recoil. Will flinched, looking to his feet, anger crashing through him.

He was going to die, and it was true that there was no way around that. But a part of him hoped that the beast was incensed enough to try breaking through its cage. He wanted these people to face the same fear, the same ending, he faced. He wanted them to feel what he felt. What he had always felt. Not once while living here had he been able to trust them to look out for him. Instead, he always looked over his shoulder or checked his locks. He’d always feared the day they decided he needed to leave. There were no other villages close, and there were things that came out at night in these woods that were the foundation of nightmares. Nightmare Stags and Basilisks were to name only two of the many that came creeping out once the sun started to set.

Being forced into the wilderness was as good as a death sentence in this area.

But Bev and Bella’s faces rotated through his mind, their bodies broken and bloody from that outcome. Skin bloodless, eyes sightless.

His heart thudded at the image.

Rubbing his face, he looked up and out the window that faced toward the village. Some people milled about but most had already gone to work or back home by this point. Bella had

mostly likely gone to her apothecary, grinding herbs and mixing liquids. Will wondered when Alana would begin to join her in the shop. Bev was probably sitting in Lucas' workshop, keeping a steady stream of conversation going as he bent over his work. Will didn't doubt that in the quiet of the morning, she helped him, when no one was likely to walk in and see it. Lucas adored her too much to not let her give it a go if she wanted. And Will knew she wanted more than being a 'housewife.'

There were others too, he knew would be going on with their day. Will nodded once, hardly glancing at the Head Priest who beamed at his compliance.

"Good, good," Chilton murmured, hands pulling the tome closer. He chewed his lips, indecision warring on his features before settling. Taking one hand, he reached into the hidden pockets of his robes.

Will watched his hands as he pulled out a folded piece of paper and placed it on the table, pushing it toward Will with two fingers. His fingernails were well taken care of, no calluses or scars on his palms or the top of his hands. They looked soft and a little smaller than Will's.

"I am aware of how you think the people see you," Chilton suddenly said, his voice pitched low and soothing. It did nothing but irritate Will. "But, there will be sadness at your sacrifice. You will be missed."

His words grated Will's ears. It was condescending and ridiculous. Will was painfully aware of what the others thought of him, save a small handful. He could see Bev and Bella having small conversations, staring out at the mountain, words a low murmur as they spoke of him. Moments that would be quick and quickly swallowed by the expansion of time. Over time, they would speak and think of him less and less. And he would fade out.

Or, the others in the village would speak of him, twisting who he was into what they thought he was, till when he was spoken of, he was the malignant entity they were lucky to be rid of.

It was likely to end up being both.

He swallowed the scathing words that crawled up his throat, and gave Chilton a sharp nod. He didn't move till his front door shut, letting the ringing silence fill the space of his home. It was what would remain soon enough.

He forced himself to unclench his fingers from around the edge of the counter, turning his attention on his breathing. It hadn't changed much, but it kept his mind from other things. Like chasing down the Head Priest and giving him a good shake.

Sighing harshly through his nose, he pushed off the counter and moved to the table, bringing the folded piece of paper closer. Picking it up, he unfolded it, running his thumb over the scrawled ink. It wasn't any bigger than his thumb, and the ink was in a rich green. The letters swirled across the paper, almost all the symbols connecting so that it formed two blocks. The handwriting was fancy and flowing, giving him a headache to stare at his name for too long.

Crumpling it in his fist, he brought it hand to his lips, pressing it there as he considered throwing it in his fireplace. It could be rendered to ash in a matter of moments. Erase the evidence of his fate. Not that he could actually do that. Not with the smell of Chilton still lingering in his home, tainting it.

Before he could follow the thought through, a soft knock interrupted his thoughts.

Shoving the slip of paper into his pocket, he opened his door to find Bev and Lucas on his doorstep. Looking around, he found no sign of Chilton or his followers. Neither did he see any of the other villagers loitering around his home to keep an eye on him.

“This is such bullshit!” Bev said in way of greeting, stomping her way up his steps and into his home before Will could say anything. Lucas gave him an apologetic look as he stepped up, hunching his shoulders and ducking his head as he passed through the doorway. It was honestly a miracle they didn’t run out of food faster during the winter.

Will shut the door behind them, turning to watch Bev look around his home for the first time before dropping into the chair Chilton had just left, adjusting her cloak and crossing her legs. Lucas took up standing just behind her, eyes scanning his home.

Bev crossed her arms, flicking a strand of hair out of her face. “There’s no way your name was the one pulled. It should have been Mason or Tobias. They’re an actual problem.”

Will raised an eyebrow at her, taking the seat on the other side of the table, mirroring her stance. “Good morning Bev, Lucas. What brings you here?” Will asked calmly, pretending this was like every other morning as he glanced between the two of them. Lucas looked vaguely uncomfortable, but his wife just looked thunderous.

“To rant,” Bev said, staring him down from across the table. “And convince you that this is bullshit and you shouldn’t do it.”

That was why Lucas was looking so anxious. If anyone else heard what Bev was saying, they’d retaliate. They might even try to force her out of the village. Not that Lucas would let that happen, but it would cause some bad blood.

Snorting a laugh, Will rubbed his forehead, staring at the table. Of course Bev would tell him to run. “I agree that this is bullshit, but there’s nothing to be done about it. Fate does seem to have a strange sense of humor.” The slip of paper in his pocket seemed to scald his leg.

“You can always do something. Pack your things and leave.”

“Do you think the others won’t already believe that I plan to do that?”

Bev pursed her lips, eyes darting to the side as she thought. Nobody trusted him. He didn’t doubt that just because he hadn’t seen them when he opened the door that they weren’t watching his home, making sure he didn’t try to slip away.

“I could cause a distraction,” Bev offered suddenly, making Lucas stiffen behind her, eyes swinging down to look at the top of her head. “Buy you enough time to disappear into the

woods before anyone notices."

"No."

Both Lucas and Will said it at the same time, startling Bev. She whirled around to glare up at her husband, who glared right back. "What do you think will happen to you if he gets caught? They'll want to string you up to set an example," Lucas said, voice rumbling out of him.

"Will doesn't deserve this."

"He doesn't," Lucas agreed, glancing at the man in question, to find him looking down at his lap, dark curls obscuring his face. He always thought it was both odd and polite that Will never really looked at people. He understood why, and respected the dedication it took to always put others above your own wants. It was why he never minded Bev stopping by to say hi to him. Anyone who put others first like Will did was no bad person. "But I doubt he wants you getting hurt for him on his conscience. It's a lot for a person to handle."

Bev puffed up, clearly readying for a fight. So, Will spoke up before she could, looking up enough to stare at her throat. "And even if I did manage to slip away while you distracted them, who do you think they would blame? They know we're friends. It wouldn't take them long to put two and two together, especially since you don't cause scenes."

His words brought her head swiveling around to narrow her eyes at him. Lucas relaxed a bit with his wife's glare now directed at someone else. "Do you think I'm afraid of those halfwits?"

"You should be."

Will's words brought both of them up short. Bev saw them as ignoramuses, and Lucas saw them as small enough to handle if needed. Neither of them had considered how ugly things could turn if everyone turned against them. Lucas was big, but not even he could fight off all of them.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Will said, "Look, Bev. I really appreciate you and everything you've done."

"I hear a 'but' coming," she said, her voice low, but more in the way one speaks when they're giving up rather than when they're angry.

"Lucas is right, I don't want the harm you come to because you helped me on my conscience. Especially since I've already decided to do this." His words had her opening her mouth to argue again, but he barrelled on before she could. "Someone has to, and it was fair, even if it doesn't feel that way. Why should I get to pass it off to someone else because I don't want to do it. No one does. But someone *has* to. It's the price of living here."

"It's a stupid price," Lucas muttered, eyes on Will.

Will nodded, but didn't say anything in response. Everyone knows the price. If they really didn't like it, they could pack up and go. There was nothing keeping them here except their

own choices.

Instead, he met Bev's gaze for probably the first time in their time knowing each other. "Thank you," he said, smiling softly at her. He had to fight not to see too much as he said, "For being my friend when you didn't have to."

She gave him a wobbly smile, arms dropping to her lap as she said, "Yeah, well. Who else was going to help me feed him?" she asked, jerking a thumb to her husband.

Her words reminded Will of something. Looking up, he stared at Lucas' nose as he said, "You can take the meat and herbs in the shed. The tools you gave me are in there too, so you can take those back. I doubt I'll need them anytime soon." A ghost of a smile crossed his lips at his own words.

Lucas smiled back, nodding his gratitude. Will knew that he would wait till Will was gone before going in it, out of respect more than anything.

If he was honest, Will didn't have many things he was sad to say goodbye to. This was one of the few things that did. Lo crossed his mind, but there was nothing to be done about it. He did wonder if he'd see Bella before he left. Looking back, life hadn't been the kindest to him, and in some ways, it made saying goodbye easier.

Maybe Fate did know what it was doing when it chose him. Anyone else's loss would be felt more deeply, and for much longer, than his would.

Touching his pocket, Will felt the outline of the paper that had set his future in stone.

Night crept slowly by, the stars seeming to shine even brighter.

Will sat on his steps, staring up at the sky. The lantern in the windows of a few homes told him who was keeping an eye on him.

He tried to find all the constellations his father had taught him. The North Star was easy to find and he found himself staring at it most of the time. His breath clouded in front of him, shivers occasionally wrecking his frame, even with him being as bundled up as he was.

The forest had been quiet for the most part. Sometimes the wind would cause the branches to rattle. Or an owl would hoot, its call echoing through the night. Only once did something let out a long, mournful cry. A Nightmare Stag by the sound of it, though it sounded a long way off.

He had only seen one once in his life, when he was in his early teens. He'd gotten lost checking his traps and been stuck sleeping in the woods for a night. The full moon had cast an iridescent glow around the beast as it'd bent to drink out of the lake Will had chosen to sleep near. Dark as the night itself, the beast's antlers had gleamed wickedly, and its feathers had refracted the light.

Beautiful and deadly. It had lifted its head after, crying out to the moon, water dripping darkly from its lips and down his neck.

Its form had lingered long in Will's mind, keeping sleep away for weeks after.

Now, he wondered if it was the same one he'd seen all those years ago. No one knew how long they lived. Will guessed they outlived any human for a number of generations.

The sky began to lighten when Chilton appeared, a lantern swinging in his hand as he walked to him, followed by some villagers who all held lanterns.

"Are you ready, Mr. Graham?" Chilton asked when he'd reached Will's home.

Will wasn't sure why he asked. He was going whether he was ready or not. He could read it on the expressions of the men around him. Jack, Tobias, Franklyn, Jimmy, Brian, and Matthew. More than enough men to escort him up the mountain. No Mason thankfully. He probably saw it as something beneath him.

A small part of Will was disappointed that Bella hadn't come. He'd hoped to have one last word with her. But with her being ill, Jack no doubt wanted her to remain home where it was warm. That, and unlike Lucas, he'd never understood Bella's attention to Will.

Will pressed his hand against the paper still in his pocket and nodded silently, standing from his steps, feeling the ache in his joints from sitting still for so long. He was sure that his cheeks and nose were pink from the chill. His fingers were numb too.

Jack stepped forward, drawing Will's attention to the blindfold that was clenched in his hands. It looked black in this lighting, but it could have easily been a dark red. It would be Chilton's style to have him wrapped in a red blindfold. He would love the dramatization and symbolism.

Will kept still as Jack approached. His fingers twitched when the fabric was wrapped around his head, turning his world black.

Quietly, so no one else would hear, Will said to Jack, "There's a bear rug in the house. You can give it to your wife. It's warm, so it'll help stave off the cold."

Jack paused tying the blindfold, body tensing. Will knew about Bella, and appreciation and anger warred in him. Appreciation that he was being thoughtful and offering to help. And for purposefully not announcing it to the rest of the men gathered. Anger because it was no one else's business what was happening with his Bella.

Appreciation won out in the end. He finished tying the blindfold, moving away from Will as he said, "Thank you."

Will turned his head in the direction of the words, barely nodding in turn. It wasn't much, but it was all he could offer.

Chilton cleared his throat, his robes swishing as he moved. "Good. There's a path just over there," Will assumed he was pointing for the others, "that will take you straight to the

mountain. It will lead you to the Sacred Site, where Will will remain."

Will wondered if *Scared Site* had been made up to make Chilton sound more official. He'd never heard of it before.

"I wish you all luck," Chilton said, clearly getting ready to leave them. He had no intention of getting anywhere near that mountain. "And we thank you for your sacrifice, Mr. Graham."

Will wondered if he really should be thanked for something he had no choice in.

~TBC~

Chapter End Notes

I'm so excited to meet Hannibal. It's gonna be great.

Also, I'm going to try and update "No Harm List" as soon as possible, so if you're reading that one too, keep an eye out!

Trek Up

Chapter Summary

Will is taken up the mountain.

That's it.

Chapter Notes

This ended up actually being an unplanned chapter. It was supposed to be short and either at the end of the last one, or just beginning of the next chapter I'll post. But apparently, I don't write things happening rapidly. So, here ya go.

This is basically just build up to Will and Hannibal's first meeting...so sorry.

Not beta read

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will cursed whichever god or goddess was to blame for Chilton's stupidity.

It was probably Até, though cursing her felt a little dangerous, even with death hanging over him.

Climbing up a mountain in the dark was difficult. Even trekking through the woods at night without a lantern was no easy task. With a mountain, there were holes and rocks that were hard to see and made it more likely to slip or fall. And falling here was more likely to lead to your death.

But trying to do it completely blind was impossible. That was Will's belief as he found himself face down into the rocks for the fourth time since they started climbing up the side.

His palms ached from scraping them, and they were no doubt bleeding. His jaw did as well where he'd bashed it into what he assumed was a rock. He was lucky to still have all his teeth from the strength of the blow.

The time he'd fallen before he'd knocked his knee pretty good, and now walked with a slight limp, the joint twinged in protest to movement. Before that, he'd crashed into a tree with his shoulder, almost jarring it out of place. A bruise was already beginning to form from it. And the first time, he'd rolled his ankle so hard he thought he broke it.

During one of these, he found that the trail was squished between a sheer drop and a steep wall. He could imagine how they could see the tops of the trees that span for hundreds of miles. Or the expanse of the horizon that went on for as far as the eye could see.

Will pushed himself up, one hand finding the edge of the trail so he knew how close he was to a long drop. He was going to kill himself before the beast ever got the chance.

The cold made things worse. It was cold enough to heighten his sensitivity, but not enough to truly numb anything. The cuts on his palms stung more sharply. His nose was no doubt pink with cheeks pale which meant the bruise on his face would be more prominent.

Muttering and cursing sounded behind him, and then hands grabbed him by the arms and hauled him to his feet again. His arms burned under the rough grips. Will supposed he should be grateful they didn't leave him to fumble back to his feet, but he was too pissed at Chilton to really feel any kind of gratitude. And, if one of them bothered to keep a good hold on him, he wouldn't have fallen at all. The most he got was a hand on his shoulder to direct him.

"For fucks sake, he'll brain himself before we get there," said Jimmy, directly to Will's right. He was one of the men who helped Will back to his feet.

"Then maybe you should keep a better hold of him."

Brian. And he was holding Will's other arm, keeping him steady.

The two ran a little shop in town that sold bread. They were one of the few people who were up before Will most days. And you could typically hear them arguing at any time of the day. There was the general question of why they chose to work together when it was clear they could never get along for more than a handful of minutes.

"And what about yourself?" Jimmy snipped. Will could see him jerking his chin at Brian's hand still on Will's arm. "Why can't you? Too incompitent?"

"Too busy looking after you. How many times have you tripped so far? Four? Five? If I watched Will, who'd watch after you?" Brian asked, a sneer coloring his words. Not that he had a lot of room to talk about tripping. If he had always been to Will's left, he'd tripped more than Will had, but hadn't fallen yet. He wasn't sure why either of them had volunteered to come.

Or Franklyn.

The only person who was louder than those two, and tripped more often, was Franklyn, who'd trailed behind the group a few paces the entire time. Out of everyone, he was the only one who felt more fear than distaste for Will. Though, it had been oddly coupled with interest, rather than hate. Will had never been able to figure out the man who had a tendency to attach himself to others. Tobais had been his most recent attachment, though it sounded like Matthew would be the one next.

Matthew, a man who kept mostly to himself and provided furs for the town, had walked ahead of him, making sure they didn't lose the round man over the edge of the mountain.

From the sounds Franklyn had made during the trek, there had been a few close calls. Jack and Tobais had taken the lead from the start, neither interested in following the others or helping Will at all.

“Enough,” Jack growled, interrupting the two before they could get going. He spoke low, keeping his voice just loud enough for them to hear. “Both of you keep a hand on him. I’m tired of listening to you crash about. We don’t know what else is on this mountain, and I’d rather not attract its attention with you three acting like some blind mules.”

“Blind mules?”

Brian and Jimmy had said it together, outraged.

Will sighed, shifting his weight, waiting for the group to start moving. His patience was waning at being talked about, rather than to, consistently. Regardless of what might happen to him once they reached their destination, he was still in fact there and fully functioning. Despite what the number of times he’s tripped may say.

Jimmy and Brian muttered back and forth, too low for Jack to hear, as they started forward again. This time, they both kept their hands on Will’s arm, clustering closely behind him.

“Is he calling us sterile?”

“I think dumb is supposed to be the focus.”

“Or us being ‘mixed’ breeds.”

“That doesn't make sense.”

“When does Jack ever make sense?”

“I can still hear you,” Jack hissed, words almost venomous in their anger.

Both of the men shut their mouths with a click. Regardless of their dislike for Jack, they still feared him. Jack could force anyone out of the village, unchallenged if he wanted, as long as he had a sound enough reasoning. Usually, it would take a town meeting for someone to be removed, but everyone knew that Mason Verger wasn’t a fan of the pair. He considered them useless annoyances. Ones that should be removed if possible. It wouldn’t take much to get them tossed out if Jack was really set on it. Everyone in town knew that.

Thankfully, for all of Jack’s faults, he was still mostly fair. It was why Will had never been tossed out. He’d never given a good enough reason for Jack to demand it.

They walked in silence for a bit, with Will tripping twice more. Those times Brian and Jimmy were able to catch him before he fell. His toes smarted from the abuse. They were definitely bruised. They might be bleeding. He caught his toe hard enough the last time to bust them.

Will had no idea how much time had passed. He couldn’t see, and the only thing he could hear was the breathing of those around him. Usually, birds singing would tell him when

sunrise was approaching, but nothing lived on the mountain. It was eerily quiet apart from them.

He supposed they had to be getting close now. The Sacred Site, as Chilton called it, couldn't be too far if he wanted Will to be blindfolded the entire time. Him being blindfolded had slowed them down quite a bit. And he needed to be there before the sun rose.

Lo was probably already up. He woke early to check his traps. He said it was because he liked to stargaze, so he didn't mind getting up earlier. Will wasn't sure the man ever slept. Or he at least kept strange hours. He probably wouldn't know of what happened to Will for close to a week. He'd assume that they just missed each other for the first few days. Then, when he really began to get concerned, he'd wait at the river at one of the spots Will frequents. Only desperation or curiosity would be able to drive him into town.

While Will could understand why an outsider would avoid their town, he'd never understood Lo's level of avoiding it. And he'd never tried to understand. Lo had never offered an explanation.

"Sun's going to break the horizon," Tobais said, breaking the silence. Tension rippled through the group. They'd been told by Chilton that they had to get him up there before that. The consequences could be ugly otherwise.

Jack gritted his teeth, picking up his pace. "It's not much further ahead according to the Head Priest. Should be right around that bend."

Air seized in Will's lungs at the information. It wouldn't be too much longer now.

The others shifted at the words, unease moving amongst them. A wheezing noise sounded behind Will, like someone had choked on a whine.

"We should have been there a lot earlier, but some people can't keep to their feet."

Tobais' words prickled along WIll's scalp, though he knew he wasn't the only one being referred to. Judging by the huffs of indignation on either side of him, the barb didn't go unnoticed.

"I can't wait to get out of here," Brain said, his hand tightening their hold. Will wasn't sure who he was talking to, if he was talking to anyone at all. "This place makes my skin crawl."

"Agreed," Jimmy said, stepping nearer to Will. Any closer, and he was likely to step on the back of Will's boots.

They walked a few more paces before Franklyn spoke up for the first time. "Do all of us have to go?"

His words were breathy from panic and exertion. Again, Will wondered why the man decided to come along at all. It wasn't like they needed this many people to escort him and no one was forced to come.

Jack's boots shifted in the dirt and gravel, soft scraping as he turned to look back on the group. Will could picture his fierce glare as he surveyed them, dark eyes skipping over Will completely as he took in Franklyn's face ruddy from the exercise. Tobias probably didn't bother to stop at all, and kept moving ahead. "You and Matthew can stay here."

Jack no doubt let Franklyn stay because he was tired of being around him, and he let Matthew stay in order to raise the likelihood of Franklyn actually staying behind. If he got freaked out while benign alone, he'd come crashing along, alerting anything in a mile radius of their location. He was probably the only person Will felt some pity for in the group.

He was almost as disliked as Will.

But there was no room for pity for anyone else. Panic had taken up residence in Will's chest, grabbing his ribcage and pulling it tight along his lungs. The reality of what was coming helped pressed down on it too. Even with the morning cold, sweat dripped down his neck and dot his back. His throat was dry, so his throat clicked when he swallowed.

Will was led forward as his thoughts, which had been running in several different connections, began to converge into one. For the first time since his name had been drawn, he contemplated making a run for it. He wasn't tied down. Jimmy and Brian weren't all that strong, and they were hardly holding him at all, too focused on where they were. With the sun coming up, it would be easy for him to see, so he wouldn't need to try and steal a lantern. And he could rip the blindfold off.

Hands pushed on Will, maneuvering him for the first time, till he was sitting on something flat and cold. Reaching down, his fingers brushed against stone. The hands left him, footsteps telling him that they hadn't gone far. They had made it to the site, though none of the men were saying anything. They were too afraid of attracting the cursed beast's attention. Will could almost smell the fear rolling of them.

He could run. Franklyn wouldn't be able to catch him, and he had surprise on his side for Matthew. Lo would help hide him. He didn't have to return to the village, and this way, Bev and Lucas couldn't be blamed for his running. And there was no real evidence that anything bad would happen. It was all based on what Chilton said and believed.

Whispering too soft to pull Will from his thoughts, scraping of metal, and then iron locking around his wrists. A hard jerk, more out of surprise than anything, told him they'd just chained him to the rock. The restraints were short enough he wouldn't reach his face either. And tight enough he wouldn't be able to pull his hands through.

The panic that had been squeezing his lungs now moved to his throat, choking him.

"Wait," Will croaked, his first words since they started walking.

More whispering and then footsteps retreating, going back in the direction they had come from.

Will jerked around, barely able to turn at all, as turned his face in the direction of the exit, hoping someone was still there.

“Wait!”

Will’s scream echoed around him.

Hands on his shoulders made him jump. “Sorry about this Will. You know, we never really hated you,” Jimmy said, his voice sounding far away, even with his hand on Will’s shoulder.

Brian hummed his agreement, just as far. “We don’t think it’s fair, but your name was the one pulled.”

And then the hand disappeared and their footsteps faded.

“Don’t go,” Will whispered, his voice broken. It was too soft for anyone to hear. They’d caught in his throat when he realized how futile saying them would be. None of the men were coming back. Franklyn and Matthew hadn’t even made it all the way to the site before they’d stopped. And the others couldn’t wait to leave it, practically running away the moment they could.

He was alone. He was always alone, but now he was really alone.

Death hovered over him, ready to take his soul to the Underworld. He wondered how Hades would judge his soul.

His hands curled into fists before relaxing, his ears straining to catch any sounds. It was quiet enough he’d be able to hear the scurrying of a mouse. The cold seeped through his skin and reached his bones, numbness finally beginning to set in. He shifted, turning to face forward again. He sat with his hands dangling between his legs, body hunched over and head dipped forward.

His cuts didn’t hurt as much, and he didn’t notice the pain in his jaw or knee. The only pain he really felt was from the cold of the rock that penetrated his cloak and pants. It was like shards of ice slowly numbing him. He supposed once the sun rose, the rock would warm to a pleasant temperature. Though he wouldn’t live long enough to experience that.

The question that now plagued him was how he would die.

There was no name given for what lived here, or description, since it was considered taboo. There was no telling what would come. He supposed whatever lived here might eat his heart out. It might rip his throat open, bleeding him dry. Or it might start eating him while he was alive. That would be pretty bad.

A Basilisk would kill its prey the moment it looked at them.

A Nightmare Stag ate the heart out of its victim after it used its antlers to run them through.

Harpies snatched up their prey and took them back to their nest where they would begin eating them while they were alive.

Sirens drowned their victims before eating them.

Will doubted the beast living in the mountain were any of those creatures. He'd never heard of any of those being cursed by the gods because of them following their natures. Which meant whatever resided here was monstrous enough to warrant the gods stepping in.

Something warm touched Will's face. Sunlight. The sun had broken the horizon line.

Strange. Chilton said that there was to be no godly witnesses when he died. The beast clearly didn't care who or what saw when it tore through his flesh. It brought a small level of comfort oddly enough. It proved that the Head Priest didn't know everything, regardless of what he proclaimed.

A small smile tugged at Will's lips at the image of Chilton's reaction. He'd go red, lips pressing into a thin white line. His eyes would narrow, brows pinching. His chest would puff up and hands would fold either in his lap or behind his back.

It would not be unlike a rooster preparing for a fight.

Sighing, Will tilted his head up, enjoying the warmth that was seeping through him from the sun. He could picture the sky changing from a deep blue to a soft pink, accented by buttery golds and warm yellows. The sun would almost blend into the colors as it crept up, till it was high enough to change the sky into hazy and light blues.

The urge to rub his neck caused his fingers to twitch. It was like an itch you were unable to scratch. Or when you felt someone was watching you and you couldn't look around. Irritating and attention consuming. He considered contorting himself low enough to do it, or to pull at his blindfold.

Clacking echoed ahead of Will, like pebbles falling against a larger stone.

The hairs on the back of his neck rose in warning, but he didn't lift his head. His fingers dug into his pants, twisting into the material to keep them from shaking. Thudding sounded in his ears as his heart rate picked up. It was fast enough to make him dizzy.

A soft brushing of movement came next, almost unnoticeable in comparison to his heartbeat. It was like something large and heavy was being dragged over the ground. But quieter. As thought it was built for that kind of movement.

Like a snake.

Will's breath rushed out of him, his pulse slamming in his throat, the panic trying to claw its way out in the form of a scream. Sweat dripped down the side of his face, all the cold forgotten. Now, he felt like he might burn up in his long sleeved shirt and heavy cloak.

Fucking gods, it was a Basklisk after all.

And with his eyes covered, it meant he would be alive when it ate him.

~TBC~

Chapter End Notes

I promise, Hannibal will be introduced in the next chapter! Pinky promise, and no crossing.

Which might be fitting, since Halloween is soon and all the monsters, ghouls, and ghosts are out and about. Maybe I'll post the next one on Halloween...we shall see.

A Long Conversation

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will have a conversation

Chapter Notes

So. I did not get this out by Halloween, but I hope everyone had an awesome October 31. Writing without being able to use sight proved to be a lot harder than I was expecting. But Will did let some of his sass show. I adore sassy Will. Anyway, please let me know if something is confusing!

TW: mentions of bullying

Not beta read

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will had actually spent a lot of time in his life thinking about death. It had grown to the point where he envisioned it as a being who led Will by the hand, taking him towards his death. Living in the town he did, working around the people he knew, living to old age seemed like an impossibility when he was a kid.

This idea felt most true when he got stuck between Mason and his group. He dragged himself home bleeding, bruised, and just shy of broken after those moments. He was sure that he'd be kicked out of town and eaten by wolves.

Later, when they started to leave him alone and after his father died, he wondered if he would injure himself in the woods and die of starvation or dehydration. No one would go looking for him. At least not till it was too late.

After that, when he felt more comfortable in the woods than in the village, he considered something Other would get him. He'd stumble across it running his lines or fishing. There would be a moment of startled recognition and awe as Will saw one in real life for the first time. And then it would kill him.

Recently, he'd stopped thinking of death in the hows and focused on the whys. Why he would die. Would he simply get sick? Would he make a simple mistake? Would it simply be pure dumb bad luck?

Death hadn't grown far away for him, it had just moved where it lingered around Will. He'd thought of it more of lingering just over his shoulder, watching his life but having no interest in intervening till it was time to take his soul to Hades realm.

It had shifted again.

Now it was circling him, quite literally, as it seemed to be surveying him before it struck. The light scraping was moving around the rock he was chained to.

Will had never seen a Basilisk, but the fact it was a really big snake didn't make it hard to envision. Pale yellow eyes tracking every movement, mottled green and brown scales that help it blend into the background, sharp ivory teeth meant for piercing rather than crushing.

It didn't paint a very pretty picture of what was to come.

Breathing hard, Will fought to control his breathing, his heart about ready to pound out of his chest. Maybe if he didn't, he'd hyperventilate himself to passing out. Maybe then he wouldn't feel any pain when the thing bit him. Though unlikely.

The silence was oppressing. Or maybe it was the waiting with no distraction.

The thing seemed to have completed a full circle around him and had stopped directly in front of him. Its gaze was a physical touch against his skin, bringing goosebumps along behind it. If he hadn't been forced to wear the blindfold he'd be dead by this point. The Fates were taking no mercy on him.

"I must say," a deep accented voice said, "it has an age since I saw something so curious."

Will jerked, hard enough that the chains rattled as they cut into his wrists to stop him from moving too far. Basilisks didn't speak. Very few creatures, and none that he was familiar with here in this area, could speak like this.

Will was facing something else entirely.

"Why blindfold a creature who is facing their death? Do they not deserve to look Death in the eye? To know their fate?" the creature asked, tone thoughtful if lazy. It wasn't an accent he'd ever heard. Soft and lilting, cultured. Polished.

Intelligent.

More shifting weight, and Will got the impression that it was now looming over him.

"Curious."

The word was nothing more than a hum, like a thought that had slipped out.

"Curious?" Will asked, his voice rasping out. His voice was too dry to really be speaking. He hadn't meant to talk at all, but seeing as he was going to die regardless, he didn't see a reason why not to. "Aren't you used to seeing humans chained up for you by this point? I'd assume by this point not much would surprise you."

More shifting, and Will automatically leaned back till the chains stopped him. Even without his sight, he was sure that it had moved closer to him.

“My time in existence has proven to be mostly tedious. Though, occasionally, I do find myself surprised.”

“Have I surprised you?” Will asked, cocking his head to the side. He couldn’t help but wonder what this thing looked like. Maybe he was speaking to something akin to a sphinx or a centaur. “That’s funny. I thought you would have been expecting me to show up today. I did show up right on time.”

Laughter, nothing more than a whisper of noise, and then fingers that were not his were brushing over the blindfold. Will jerked back, more from the startled coolness of the skin than the fact that the creature was actually touching him, but the fingers followed. They were cool, but not cold. The finger pads were rough, but gentle as they ran over the cloth,

So, whatever this thing was, it had a human torso. Could look like a human completely, Will supposed, like the gods. But he hadn’t heard footsteps ever.

“Politely punctual,” it mused, thumb running over the edge of the blindfold before disappearing. “And what should I call this politely punctual human?”

“Do you always ask for the name of your food?”

A tongue clicked. “Now don’t be rude. I rather detest it.”

Will wasn’t sure how he was able to talk over the panic. Maybe the panic was giving free reign to his tongue. It would explain why he was being so reckless with something that could kill him in half a second.

He swallowed, tasting bitterness.

He’d dealt with rudeness all his life. Very few had ever been polite to him, though he’d worked to be polite to others.

“Then shouldn’t you introduce yourself first? Isn’t that what’s considered polite?”

More shifting, and then Death apparently sat next to Will, content to have a conversation with him before the end. “Very well. I am Hannibal Lecter. I have lived here long before you were an idea within your grandparents mind. Long before you grandparents were an idea within their grandparents mind.” It made it sound that it chose to live here. Like this was a vacation rather than a permanent sentence of imprisonment. Will wondered if it thought it could leave whenever it wanted and it simply stayed put for its own amusement.

It —Hannibal—paused, clearly waiting for Will to reciprocate.

“Will. Will Graham. Moved into the village down the path when I was a kid.”

Short and to the point, unlike Hannibal’s.

“Is Will short for William?” the creature asked, his voice sounding closer. Will would bet his bear rug that it was staring straight at him.

Will shifted, unsure how to feel with it so close. “Only my father would call me that. Will is fine.”

“And I suppose that he is upset that his son has been sent off to be eaten by the big bad beast up in the mountain.”

“He’s dead, so I doubt he cares much.”

“Sickness? I hear humans are rather susceptible to that sort of thing.”

Humans. Making a distinct division between the two of them. As though it were untouchable.

“Injury in the woods. Accidents happen.”

Hannibal made a thoughtful noise. Scraping sounded behind Will and to the opposite side of him. It was big enough to wrap around the stone altar he was sitting on. Which meant only its torso and probably head was human, but the rest of it wasn’t.

“Accidents? What kind? Were you the one to find him?”

“What’s going on here?” Will asked instead, finally turning to that he was at least facing Hannibal. None of this was making any sense. “Why are you asking me all these things?”

“Because I am curious.” It said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Why would they bring you to me blindfolded and chained? Even a lamb before slaughter is granted the right to see its butcher. Do they fear you so much that they needed to tie you down?” Hannibal asked, amusement highlighting the lilt of its words.

Rather than answering the questions, Will asked, “Have the ones before not been chained?” He already knew they weren’t blindfolded. None of the others were like him.

“The chains were always there, but never used. More for in-case purposes than actual use.” There was a pause. “You sounded enraged by the fact.”

Had he? He hadn’t meant to. He wasn’t even sure what to feel any more.

“Wouldn’t you be?”

“Am I not already?”

“Enraged or chained?” Hannibal asked lightly. Fingers starting plucking at Will’s hair.

Out of instinct, Will’s hand shot out to knock the offending hand away, a look of disbelief twisting his features. His curls now reached his shoulders, so they didn’t tend to stick up at odd angles like they were prone to when it was shorter. But, with his name being pulled, no

sleep, and stress, his curls were fuzzed out. They were beginning to take on a life of their own.

It —Hannibal—he was trying to groom Will's rather uncontrollable curls in tameness.

A huff, more amused than offended, but the hand didn't return to Will's hair. Based on his voice and mannerisms, Will pictured Hannibal sitting with his hands folded in his lap, either staring up at the sky or at Will. He pictured him having a rather defined face, one that wouldn't be average or fade into the background, though he couldn't get a clear picture of what it actually looked like.

"Though, I will be honest and say that the blindfold is more interesting to me than the chains," Hannibal said. Will could feel his eyes on the blindfold. "Red. A deep rich red, rather than a more ceremonial bright red. A rather pretty color against your skin tone." A pause. "A rich blue, like a sapphire, would work just as well."

While Will knew that a sapphire was a gem, he'd never seen one. "Do you always flatter your prey, or am I just lucky?" he asked flatly. He wasn't really interested. But he couldn't deny the interest that was growing in him for the creature sitting next to him.

"Are you prey?"

"Well, I'm certainly not an equal," Will said, waving his hands as much as he could. The chains rattled loudly.

"Ah, yes. Now what's to be done about that?"

Will had a snarky retort ready, but those hands returned, each taking a hold of a cuff.

"If you will pardon my touch for a moment," Hannibal murmured. Will remained silent, deciding just to wait to see what he did next. He hadn't seemed to need Will's permission any of the times before after all. He wasn't sure why the creature felt like he needed it now.

Crunching, wrenching, and then freedom. Will rubbed his wrists, massaging the irritated skin. It felt as though Hannibal had simply ripped the metal apart. One part told him that it was impossible, but the other told him that it was impossible for humans. Not whatever Hannibal was.

"Now that we have removed those pesky bindings, I would like you to humor me by answering my question. What caused the other humans to blindfold you? None of the others were."

The answer felt complicated. "Because they don't like my eyes."

Not the whole truth, but not a lie either. They feared his eyes. Didn't like it when he looked at them because they didn't like it when he saw more than they wanted people to be seen. There were some who raised his eyes to godlikeness. Like Chilton who'd always wanted him as a seer. And any of his ilk that were influenced by his words.

"Oh? To hide something just because it isn't liked, how strange."

“It’s not really. Parents who bare deformed children often get rid of them. Villages with distasteful pasts won’t share them with visitors. Families whose daughters get pregnant before marriage send them off under the guise of them being ill. This concept can be seen in any aspect of life, this case is no different,” Will said with a half shrug.

“Yes, but you hide them because you get something out of it. Parents remove undesired children with the hopes of being able to feed those they already have and avoid bad rumors, villages gain new facets of income when there is nothing to scare off new tenants, and families who send their pregnant daughters off keep their reputations.” Hannibal recited this like one might recite a to-do list. No emotions behind the idea of actions that leave some in terrible situations. “So what does your village get out of hiding your eyes from me?”

Him dead was what Will didn’t say, though it rolled around his mouth. He swallowed it and chose another. “The ritual being completed.”

“Ah, but that can be done without this,” Hannibal said, pulling at the edge of the blindfold near Will’s ear to emphasize his point. “In fact, it probably would have been done faster and more efficiently without it.”

Unsure what he meant but that, Will didn’t address the last bit of the statement. “It can also be done with it. They feared your reaction to them, so they wanted them covered. Village superstition and all that.”

Shifting behind and to the side again. Will turned his head to try and hear it better. He couldn’t figure out what was making that noise, only that it was Hannibal doing it.

“And why would they fear my reaction?” Amusement again. Curiosity or amusement seemed to be Hannibal's two main emotions judging by how this ritual was going so far. “I am sure they are aware by this point that I have been safely tucked away in this rock by the beings above.”

“The ritual needs to be completed,” Will said, uncomfortable. The ritual could only be completed if he was dead, and he preferred being alive.

“No, William. Why do they fear my reaction to your eyes? What makes your eyes so terrifying that they need to be covered?” Hannibal asked, but there was something in his tone that said there was more to the question than that. There was something personal about this one, whereas all the others had been asked out of curiosity.

The rock they were sitting on was warm now, the sun having risen well above the horizon by this point. There was the question of how long Hannibal would be curious before it changed to hunger. Or boredom. Maybe he would make it through most of the day. That had to be a record, though there was no one to confirm it.

“Because I see too much.”

Again, it wasn’t the whole truth, but it was the truth. He did see too much, but he also saw too deep. He could understand so much about a person just by looking. He could be that

person if he looked too long. It was something he'd discovered when he was younger and had no desire to feel that way ever again.

"So they've blinded you. Just as I followed my own nature too deeply, so they cursed me and locked me away. Fear makes others rude."

Will could only assume *they* were the gods. Beings always talked about, built temples for, prayed to. Stories existed of people seeing them, but they were few and far between. They also tended to be far-fetched in Will's opinion.

"And what color are your eyes?" Hannibal asked suddenly, jarring Will out of his thoughts of gods and what lays beyond.

"What are yours?"

"I was told maroon, once upon a time. Though it's been an age or two since someone spoke to me about the color of my eyes. A unique brown might be more accurate."

Will bet that maroon was the more accurate of the two. "Blue."

"There is rather a large range of blue," Tapping followed his words. Will wondered if he was drumming his fingers on the rock. "Ice blue, slate blue, deep blue, dark blue, blue-green, blue-grey, and all hues in between. So, which are yours?" he mused.

"All of them," Will said, a small smile curling his lip. To be honest, he wasn't sure. He avoided eyes and that included his own. He hadn't bothered to look at them in years. There hadn't been a need.

A click of disapproval. "Now, now, William. I was truthful, I expect the same from you."

Will sighed. There was no real need for it, either in lying or in telling the truth. Death was hovering just over him now, more than ready to whisk him away.

"Then in that thought, I don't know. I avoid eyes."

"Afraid of what you'll see in yourself."

Will snorted, trying to card his hand through his hair, only for the blindfold to get in the way. One would think that would be the reason. And, maybe in part, it was, but Will was already aware of his own darkness. He just tended to not seek it out.

"If I know what's there, what's the point in looking?"

"You may surprise yourself."

"Or bore myself. I'm not Narcissus."

Laughter, and Will couldn't stop his smile, surprise and delight taking him in turn. At some point, his panic had slipped away, like dew in the morning sun. The fear was still there, but it wasn't going anywhere. It was a normal human response when facing death.

The delight was more surprising than the disappearance of the panic.

Other than Lo, no one in town really talked to him. Bella and Bev tried, but under the watchful eyes of everyone, they couldn't really have any actual conversations. There was always the risk that something said could be taken wrong and land any of them in trouble. It was better to keep the conversations short and to the point.

But Hannibal was talking to him. Willingly. With more curiosity than Will really knew what to do with.

He wouldn't count it as a normal conversation, mostly because there was nothing normal by human standards about either of them. Hannibal had never been human, so he had no way of thinking or acting like one. Will simply had never been considered human by the villagers. So he wasn't sure where that left him.

If you were never treated like one, how were you to know how to act like one?

It was said that it took a monster to create a monster.

If he didn't know how to be a human, then did that make him a monster. And if he was a monster, then did that make the village a monster, hidden under the masks of civility and normal faces?

If Hannibal was considered a monster, who made him that way? Or what?

"No. I am afraid that you surpass even his beauty," Hannibal commented, bringing Will out of his twisting thoughts. It was for the best. Sometimes his thoughts took him down darker routes than he wanted. "And with none of his more unfortunate, rude personality traits."

"Wait, what?"

Hannibal had compared him to Narcissus. A being from nymph and god. One known for his beauty and self-indulgence.

Will turned to face the creature again, incredulous. "Are you trying to get me cursed?"

Gods were known for their jealousy and fickle nature. They could bless you one moment and curse you the next. Sometimes for things out of your control or to prove a point to another god. There was no lost love in Will for gods.

Hannibal hummed. "One might say you already have been."

Will deflated at that. What god would curse a dead man who was already cursed?

"The village thought so."

"I was referring to you being brought to me."

Will rubbed the back of his neck, knee bouncing. Right. This was really just the finale to a long road of misfortunes for Will. "I was cursed long before I was brought to you."

Fingers brushed over his knee, a palm pushing on it till it stilled. “I doubt very much that your eyes are cursed.”

“Want to test that?” Will hissed, angry at the fact that a complete stranger was trying to tell him what his life had been like. His fingers reached up, scratching at the blindfold in an attempt to rip it off. If Hannibal was so damn curious, he could just experience it for himself.

Hands grabbed his, stopping him. “Let’s not. I would hate to end our conversation so soon.”

Will had noted it before, but Hannibal’s hands were cool to the touch.

“It’ll end eventually. Why does it matter when?”

“I’m rather enjoying your company,” Hannibal said, letting Will go when it was clear he’d let the blindfold remain. “As you might guess, I do not get visitors often. Not one's quite as interesting as you either.”

“Is your curiosity the only thing that matters to you?”

“Is there something else you believe should?”

The question wasn’t snide or mocking. It sounded as though Hannibal was sincerely curious that there should be something other than that.

“Family,” Will offered, though he wasn’t sure he believed it. His father hadn’t been the best example of a family. Love had been there, but so had a lot of hurt.

It was quiet for a time after that.

Will would have thought Hannibal would have had an immediate response. Not that he knew anything about the creature. Much like he knew nothing about him.

So, Will waited.

The sun warmed him enough to fumble with his cloak tie. Pushing it off his shoulder, he pushed up the sleeves of his shirt, trying to relieve some of the heat. Sweat trickled down his back, pooling against his lower back. It felt like a spring day.

Soon the spring winds would come. Followed by the rains. Flowers and greenery would start to reappear. Days would be warm enough to put winter cloaks away. Fires would still be needed in the fireplaces at night for a while longer.

Finally Hannibal said after long minutes had passed, “You yourself have no family. Why choose that?”

Will shifted, his butt well and truly numb by this point. He shrugged. “You can always build a family.”

“Did you have designs on building a family?”

“No.”

Not anymore. As a kid, he did. But by this point, he knew better.

Hannibal shifted. “Family is considered to be powerful in many cultures. It is often a center focus, and they tend to be strictly structured. Some would die for it and almost all desire it. There are those who find it to be their purpose in living, and those who find nurturement in it. And yet, here we are. Two creatures without one. Do you think that makes us less?”

Again, the question didn’t sound like Will thought it should. It was clinical, detached. As though the answer wouldn't have any effect.

“Maybe in society's eyes.”

“But not yours that see much more.”

Will paused, considering those words. He settled on, “I don’t know.”

Before Hannibal could ask him another question, Will’s stomach rumbled. With him being as anxious as he’d been, he hadn’t eaten anything since yesterday. Now his body had relaxed enough to be hungry again.

Flushing, Will wrapped his arms around his stomach, like they could block the noise.

“You haven’t eaten,” Hannibal noted, voice back to amused again.

“And you haven’t eaten me,” Will groused. He was embarrassed and no doubt completely red faced. “So, yes I’m hungry. People don’t tend to eat when they think they’re about to die.”

Hannibal clicked his tongue.

“I am afraid we are going to have to postpone that for now.”

Will froze, hands flexing around his middle. “What?”

Hannibal slid off the rock and moved to stand in front of Will. “As I told you before, I rarely have visitors. And I am enjoying our conversation. I would like to continue it, but it would be rude to keep you any longer. I do not have food currently fit for human consumption, so you will need to return home to eat. You will come back tomorrow morning after you have had a proper breakfast.”

Will wasn’t sure he was hearing right. He was being sent home. To eat. And then return tomorrow. To keep talking. Not to be eaten.

“What?”

Will wasn’t sure what else to say.

“You are my sacrifice, yes?” Hannibal prompted. After Will nodded, he said, “Then you are mine to do with as I please.”

Will just stared, dumbfounded. Maybe the name Narcassius had been given to the wrong creature. This was not how this was supposed to go. And there was no telling what the villagers would think when he returned. They might put him on a pyre for all he knew.

“You will need to wait until I’m gone before you remove the blindfold,” Hannibal said, moving closer to Will. “And you will need to bring it back with you tomorrow to wear. I am afraid I must insist on that condition.”

“I don’t understand,” Will muttered, looking down. His head was about spinning with how quickly things had changed.

Cool hands touched his chin, raising his head. He assumed Hannibal was right in front of his face. He fought a shiver. “Some things can take more time to understand. I cannot claim that I understand you, nor you me. I would like to. Which is why I require you to return tomorrow. I would hate for you to face the consequences should you not. Not when things are finally beginning to get interesting.”

~TBC~

Chapter End Notes

Truthfully, I almost wrote this chapter from Hannibal's POV, mostly to see his inner dialogue on the blindfold. Because seeing Hannibal baffled by it would have been fun. Top tier fun.

Now it's going to be interesting to see how everyone back in town reacts when he comes back. Ope.

Returning

Chapter Summary

Will returns to the village, even though Lo doesn't want him to

Chapter Notes

Did I write this all in one sitting? Yes.

Is my brain now fried? Without a doubt.

Am I proud of this chapter? Ask me in a few days, after I've had time to reread my work haha

Definitely not beta read. I apologize in advance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Working his way down the mountain was a lot easier than climbing up it in some ways, and a lot more difficult in others.

After Hannibal was left, Will had removed the blindfold, blinking blearily around, squirting from the light of the sun. The chains that had pinned him laid shattered on either side of him. He knew he should have simply left, before Hannibal had a chance to change his mind, but Will had stayed, curious about the place he'd been left to die. Using a rock broken from the floor, Will put it on the blindfold on the altar to keep it from blowing away.

It indeed was red, so dark it was almost black.

Shifting his focus, Will noted the sheer amount of rock around him. The floor, the altar, the statues. All of them were of people. Some of them had been broken, with arms or heads missing, but most were completely intact and well maintained, with no ivy or cracks covering them. They were all a pale grey, most twisted in fear or shock.

There didn't seem to be any pattern to their layout. They stood randomly around the stone altar. Some were dressed like warriors, others more like Will, normal, everyday townsfolk. They faced in all directions, but most looked toward the mountain.

Picking up his cloak and draping it over his arm, he moved to study them up close. Will found that they possessed an amount of detailing that would put any human sculpture, who lacked a blessing from a god, to shame. Touching a woman who was crouched near the ground by the corner of the altar, he traced what had to be a tear running down her face. His thumb brushed over the warm stone, noting the wrinkles in his hands that were covering her mouth. And the ripples in her dress. And the crow lines around his eyes. Minute details that could have been passed over simply because it would have been easier and weren't.

He wondered if Hannibal had made these, giving himself some company during his long years of captivity. Though, Will would have probably made them happier if he were in Hannibal's position.

Exploring the small plato, Will found pillars of off white ran along the edge of the stone floor, revealing that, like the altar, it was circular. Where the stone floor ended, the ground dropped off into a steep cliff, running almost to the mountain base. Leaning over, he could just make out the light grey of statues that had either fallen off the edge or been thrown off.

If he fell, there would be no surviving the impact.

Lightheadedness swarmed him, forcing him to grab at one of the pillars to keep him from swaying. There was only one safe way off this plato. Meaning that Hannibal only had one way of escape, so the gods never had to worry about him sneaking off another way.

This place was a prison, even without walls and bars.

Backing away, he went back to studying the floor. There had once been a design painted into it, but time and weather had worn it away. Only small portions of it remained, and even it was too faded to make out anything of significance. Walking around, he found he had to watch where he stepped. The stones under his feet were cracked, vines and greenery poking through, growing large and healthy. Unlike the statues, many of the pillars had vines and flowers crawling up them. One even had a sapling clinging to it.

Following the edge of the stone flooring, Will ended up at a small, rather decrypted walkway, leading into a maw of a cave. Hannibal no doubt had gone in there when he'd left. On either side of the walkway, it dropped off again, giving the impression of a bridge.

Darkness breathed in it.

The rocks on the mountain were dark, a stark contrast to the stone used to build the flooring and pillars. A cold breeze wafting out of it. Will stared at it, head cocked to one side, curiosity curling in his gut. It was impossible to see more than a few feet into the depths. It gaped wide, edges jagged like it had been busted open suddenly, rather than worn away with time. He wondered if it was as dark inside as it looked from the outside.

A harsher wind blew out of it, messing with his curls and cooling the sweat on his brow. It seemed to be warning him away.

Giving it one last look, he walked away, heading for the trail. Despite his curiosity, he liked being alive. He wanted to keep it that way for at least a little longer.

Now more than halfway down, he wondered if he was too hasty in returning back to the village. If only to prolong the inevitable. There were only a handful of ways the villagers would handle his sudden return. None of them were good.

The trail dipped steeply, and Will grabbed the edge of the mountain to keep from sliding straight down. His skin scraped along the rock, the slight sting working to ground him. His head still swam with the fact that he was alive. And looked to be remaining the way for the foreseeable future, unless the townsfolk decided otherwise.

Regardless of what they did with him when he returned, the fact he wasn't dead would be seen as bad luck. Something that represented a foreboding future. Will found it ironic, since it would be his death that would make them think otherwise. Death was good and life was bad.

There would be a large portion that would want him to return immediately, and remain up there till he died either by the creature's hand or by starvation. The fact he had been told to return by the creature would cause them to hesitate, especially if they allowed him to talk long enough to tell them that it wasn't because he was enraged with him.

And then they would argue about whether the binding would hold up, since it was proclaimed by the gods rather than the beast. Chilton would most likely give him a hot aired response about how things should be viewed from the eyes of the gods. Which would most likely end with him trying to keep Will locked away in the temple for as long as he could manage. Will had a few guesses what would happen to him if Chilton actually ever did get his claws into him.

Not that it mattered. He could blow it out his righteous ass for all Will cared.

Reaching the end of the incline, Will paused to pull out the paper from his pocket, smoothing it open to read his name again. He'd never actually seen his name spelled out. Even with all the fancy looping, he wasn't sure about how it looked. A part of him marveled at it, and a part of him hated it. It was proof that the Fates had basically spat on him.

Or he'd thought they had. Unless Hannibal was being obtuse because he could.

It was a little staggering to think of anyone toying with the Fates. Or the gods.

He supposed if he was a creature like Hannibal, he might not fear them either, considering what he'd already gone through. Where he already was. It had to be liberating to be so unafraid of those who could crush you in an instant if they wanted.

Crumpling the paper, he shoved it in his pocket and kept going, reaching the treeline now.

Another mile, maybe two, and he would be back at the village. He could worry about the rest then.

But he found someone waiting for him, pacing back and forth across the pathway, hands twisting around their bow.

Lo walked, braided hair in disarray, across the dirt path, looking down at his feet, muttering under his breath. His features were pinched. His skin, usually a sunkissed gold, was pale, practically bloodless. If Will didn't know better, he'd say he looked ill.

Will didn't know how Lo had learned so quickly what had happened.

Hearing his approach, Lo's head snapped up, eyes going wide, the blue shockingly sky in hue. Not for the first time, Will thought that it was like the heavens had poured their color into his irises. Dropping his gaze to Lo's collarbone before he got too close, Will gave him a small, self deprecating smile, adjusting the cloak in his arms. "Miss me?"

His words were shakier than he would have liked, evidence to what he was really feeling behind the rather calm greeting.

Even now, an hour into his walk back, he could feel the phantom touch of Death lingering over his bones like a poison. His close brush with it had left him jittery. A little more broken than when he'd gone up. He just wasn't sure what in him was a little more cracked and fragile.

Lo lurched forward, but stopped before he reached the mountain edge. Instead, he waited for Will at the treeline, slinging his bow back over his back. He didn't wear a cloak today, though he'd still opted for a long sleeved shirt. "I thought you were dead," was what he said when Will stopped in front of him.

It was a shared thought.

Lo's eyes darted around him, looking for injuries. The chafed wrists were all he'd find.

"So did I."

Will still wasn't sure if he could believe he wasn't dead. He was still supposed to return tomorrow, in which Hannibal could kill him. If the villagers didn't beat him to it.

Lo's eyes darkened when they landed on his wrists. Watching his mouth, Will caught the slight tensing around it, the twitch around the eyes that gave him away. Anger and something darker flickered across his features before smoothing back out. Like a brief eclipse of a sun by a lone cloud.

There was something disconcerting about those appearing on a face that was usually so jovial. It spoke to something more in Lo than being a simple hermit.

Will dropped his gaze back to his feet.

Reaching out, Lo took his hands carefully, letting Will readjust the cloak in his arms. His brows pulled together as he studied the reddened skin. "Who did this?" The words were almost lost between pursed lips. A strain of concern lined his usually ageless face, reminding Will that there were people who really did care what became of him.

"Jack and Tobais," Will said with a shrug, knowing Lo wouldn't know either of them. They would just be faces in a crowd, but it felt good being honest. Of not shrugging it off and

pretending it was nothing. That any of this was normal or fair. Even if nothing would be done about it in the end. “They were afraid of me running after they left.” Though they hadn’t said that when they’d done it.

“How’d you get out?” Lo asked, thumb running over the skin. His skin was almost hot against Will’s, despite how pale he looked. It was as if he was his own personal furnace. A stark difference between how Hannibal had felt when he’d touched Will.

Will titled his head, eyes dropped to where his wrists were being held. They had never touched before. Not like this. Occasionally, Lo would ruffle his curls, or throw his arm around his shoulders. But this felt different. Or maybe that was the near-death experience affecting him.

“From the chains? Or from the sacrifice?” Will joked, though his voice was flat. He pulled his hands free, tucking them under his cloak to hide them from view.

Lo studied him closely, eyes narrowed. “Both.”

Will shrugged, turning away to look around them. Even down at the base of the mountain it was quiet. No birds or small critters ran about. There wasn’t even a creek or river to burble. And even when the wind stirred the trees, they moved with near silence.

“He freed me. Sent me back, but I have to return tomorrow,” Will said softly, mind racing back to those moments when he’d heard the wrenching of metal. When the bite had disappeared from his wrists. A burst of wind had him bringing his cloak closer to his chest, but not because it was cold. In fact, with the sun and the hike, it felt marvelous on his overheated skin.

“He?”

Lo’s voice brought Will’s attention back to their conversation.

The question had Will running back through his memories, like fingers flipping through the pages of a book, hunting for a specific passassage. His entire life, the creature living up in the mountain had always been an ‘it.’ A ‘thing’ to be feared and steered clear from. But now he couldn’t think that way. Hannibal had become more than just an idea, or a boogeyman hiding under his bed.

He just couldn’t decide when that change had happened.

Glancing back at Lo, he found a veiled wariness in his features that had never been directed at Will. And even now it wasn't, but it also was.

He nodded, once. “He—whatever is trapped up there—called himself Hannibal. He sent me back, but he wants me to go back up there tomorrow.”

“You met him? You saw him?” Lo asked, voice hushed, head tilting up to look past Will.

Will shook his head, remembering the cool touch of Hannibal’s hand as he stopped him from removing the blindfold. For whatever reason, it was abundantly clear that the creature didn’t

want Will to look. And Will knew that if he did, everything would end. “I was blindfolded.”

“You were what?”

Anger seethed in those words as they hissed out, but there was a touch of relief in them as well. Will risked looking further up, stopping to rest on Lo’s right cheek. The anger and the relief of his return had Lo’s skin taking back its usual golden color.

Will sighed, walking forward to head back to the village. He really was hungry and it would be another hour at least before he ate. Maybe longer if the villagers had already cleaned out his shed.

Lo fell in step next to him, keeping close but looking straight ahead.

“The people were afraid I’d anger him, or the gods, if they didn’t.”

“Because of your eyes.”

It wasn’t a question.

They had never discussed Will’s aversion to looking him in the eye, nor the reason the villagers seemed to hold a greater dislike for him than warranted, even for an outsider. It had sat unspoken between them since they first met, only being acknowledged by a quick quip of Will never being able to look straight ahead. But Lo had never pried, respecting the fact that the other man had no interest in talking about it. Or anything related to it. But Lo was smart. Enough to put bits and pieces together, even if he didn’t have the entire picture.

Will huffed, tilting his head back to stare at the sky as they walked. The path was clear enough he didn’t need to watch where he stepped.

“How’d you even know about this?” Will asked.

Lo let him shift the conversation, shrugging. “You told me, remember? The last time we met you talked about the ritual your village does, and the fact that your name would be in it. I was worried they’d cheat.”

“I know I told you, but how’d you know I was chosen?” Will asked, turning his head to look at his friend. Lo refused to look over, and instead forcefully kept staring dead ahead. Will blinked, suddenly realizing how he knew. “You went into town? You never go into town.”

Lo huffed, hands reaching over to pull his bow off his back. He plucked at the string, fingers dancing up and down it. “I do go into town occasionally.”

“You haven’t once since we’ve met.”

“I haven’t needed to.”

“And now you did?”

“I figured my friend possibly being served up like stuffed boar was a good enough reason to need to go into town, rather than waiting till you just didn’t show up to any of our usual spots,” Lo said dryly, clearly amused, despite the situation, at Will’s sheer disbelief.

Will’s brows pinched together as he turned to look ahead. Lo hated going into town. He hated dealing with people, for reasons he hadn’t told Will. And not just the ‘people are stupid’ kind of hate. And not the ‘others are an inconvenience’ either. While both could push someone into wanting to become a hermit, it didn’t explain the level of avoidance that Lo went to. It was almost personal. As though humanity had done him a deep grievous. Or that they annoyed him to his very core. Whatever the reason, it didn’t feel superficial. But they didn’t talk about Will’s aversion to eyes, and they didn’t talk about why Lo avoided others. They both had things they would rather leave untouched.

“So,” Will started slowly, eyes sliding over to watch Lo pluck at his bow string, “how did you know I was the one who was picked?”

“You mean other than the fact your home was empty?”

“We both know I go out early,” Will shot back. “My home being empty wouldn’t be that unusual.”

Both of his comments were true, and Lo nodded in acknowledgement to that. “I ran into a woman who was heading into your home to clean up and burn some incense for you,” he said, frowning. He doubted that was all she would do since Will was supposed to be dead. More than likely, she was going to ransack it, and that hadn’t sat right with Lo, but neither was in a place to stop her either.

Will’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “A woman?” When Lo nodded, he hummed. “What’d she look like?”

“Dark skinned, hair pinned back. Older. She smelled of herbs and oils and she was bundled like she was afraid it would snow,” Lo rattled off, his thoughts elsewhere.

Bella. It didn’t really surprise him that she would want to burn incense for him. She would probably be the only one brave enough to.

Huffing a laugh, Will reached up to cover his smile. “Bella,” he said, feeling Lo’s questioning look. “She’s the town healer.”

“A friend?”

“She tried to be.”

There were a number of reasons they couldn’t be anything more than familiar acquaintances. Some were because of others and some were because of Will.

They walked in silence for a bit, the trees growing closer to the trail the closer they got to town. The trees soon reached overhead to tangle their branches together. Like lovers making one last attempt to grasp each other before they can be ripped apart.

Will's nerves were finally settling. He didn't feel the need to keep his hands busy anymore. It didn't feel like there was trapped energy running up and down his bones either. It left him exhausted, sleep calling him more strongly than food by this point. All he really felt other than that was the beginning of anxiety starting to creep into his gut.

He chewed on his lip as he ran through various scenarios in his head. He would definitely be dragged before Chilton and Jack when he got back. They would be the people who would ultimately determine what happened next to him.

Jack would want him put back up on the mountain, too afraid of leaving him to his own devices to want anything else. He'd fear for the safety of the village.

Chilton would want him closely monitored, and probably followed when he returned to the mountain the next day. His curiosity would have him wanting to follow Hannibal's words. There was very little known about the trapped creature and his greed would be unable to miss an opportunity to learn more.

It was really the question of which would win out. Greed or fear. Both were powerful motivators.

It would come down to who could convince the people better.

Sighing, Will rubbed his neck, considering what either would say and the effects it would have on the people. Jack might technically have more power, but Chilton tended to have more sway over the people because he spoke 'for the gods.' No one wanted to piss off a god. Especially when they tended to already be fickle.

"You don't have to return."

Lo's words brought Will to a halt, leaving him wide eyed and gaping at the other man, much like a fish that'd been hauled out of water. Lo stopped with him, turning to face him.

Staring at Lo's hands that had stilled on his bow, Will said, "I have to return."

"Says who? The town already thinks you're dead and that thing is trapped up on the mountain. You could leave now and no one could stop you."

"I don't have anywhere to go and even if I did, I don't have any money to start somewhere else."

"So stay with me for now. Until you have enough supplies to leave and start somewhere new. No one is forcing you to stay here, Will," Lo said fiercely. He was completely serious. He didn't have any plans on letting Will go without a fight.

Will blinked, *no* stilling in his throat before he could say it as a different path unfolded before him. The idea of running felt foreign. It sat strange on him, like a taboo. And it was. But if he stayed, he'd die. Even if he didn't this morning, he would. For many who would celebrate his death.

Rage and want twisted inside him in equal measures.

Him not going anywhere had always been a given. But it didn't have to be.

Lo sensed his wavering. "Let's go back to my place—"

"Your hoarder house?" Will cut in wryly. The amount of sheer stuff in Lo's home just about drove him crazy. He supposed he was already partially crazy with his gift, and it was better than dead.

"Yes, my hoarder house," Lo agreed in exasperation, plowing on before Will could interrupt again, "and set up a plan. We can get you somewhere far away where you're safe." His eyes were bright as he spoke. There was a plan already forming in his head. Will could see it coming together, though he wasn't sure what exactly was being pieced together. Something ridiculous and outlandish. Anything else from Lo would be uncharacteristic.

Will rubbed the back of his neck, eyes falling to their feet. It would be easy. No one else knew he was alive, and they didn;t know where Lo lived. In a matter of days, he could be very far away, with no chances of ever being caught again. He really just had one concern.

"Won't there be consequences?"

Will's voice was soft, falling to the ground with how heavily it was weighted in thought. Lo shifted, digging the end of his longbow into the earth. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Will said, backing away so he could pace. He couldn't handle standing still any longer, but didn't want to head toward the village nor back to the mountain. "I was told to return by something that we have no understanding of. It's possible that I won't have a choice but to return. And, the ritual wasn't complete. I didn't die. Doesn't that mean that Hannibal could break free and come after me when I don't show up?"

"That ritual is bullshit," Lo said, almost snarling them. Like Will had never seen him worried, neither had he seen him so angry. "I don't know how your town came up with it, but there's no god that needs help from humans to keep their curses strong."

Will had often thought the same thing. The gods were considered to be all powerful. Especially in comparison to humans. The only time they needed help from humans is when they were in trouble because of other gods. Or when they made bets. This was neither of those.

But someone wrote that tome. It had taken time and effort. What would the point be in creating something useless? Especially something so intercrit.

It was the one thing Will couldn't understand. If the gods were that powerful, they didn't need humans. If they didn't need humans, that tome wasn't needed. If it wasn't needed, it never would have been created. And yet, it still existed.

So, it was possible that a sacrifice was needed.

Lo thumped it bow against the ground. "Will, listen to me, you leaving will do nothing but save you."

Will couldn't help but glance at the mountain. "You can't know that."

"Maybe not," Lo agreed breezily. "But you also don't know that it isn't true."

Rustling and footsteps drew Will attention. The hope that had been kindling in his chest slipped through the cracks in his ribcage, heart thudding dully. "I guess we'll never know."

Lo's head snapped around to look at what had caused Will to shut down so quickly. His mouth hardened into an ugly line as he too saw Jack and Tobais standing wide eyed and frozen. They stared in disbelief and anger at Will.

Whether he wanted it now or not, Will would be returning back to the village.

———

Everyone was crammed into the temple, seated at the pews.

The inside of the temple was set up so that the pews curved to create a semi-circle in front of the podium that rested two steps above the rest. Large windows allowed the sunlight to filter in, highlighting the many statues of gods and goddesses that lined the edge of the room. Zeus, Athena, and Apollo stood at the front of the temple, right behind the podium.

Will, Chilton, and Jack were the only ones left standing. Chilton has his usual podium at the front of the temple. Jack in front and to the left of it. Will had been placed a few feet in front of that, so he stood at the center of the semi-circle, facing both Jack and Chilton.

Judge and executioner.

He stared at the ground, knowing anywhere else he looked he'd meet the gaze of someone. He could feel their eyes running all over him, hear their muttered words as they echoed in the cavernous room.

It made his skin itch.

It made him wish that when Lo had looked at him, eyes pleading with him to run for it, to let Lo buy him time, he had taken it. Made him wish that he hadn't shaken his head, giving his friend a small smile. Made him wish that he hadn't told him to just go home. It made him wish that he hadn't so willingly followed the two men back to town.

It made him wish a lot of things, but those were at the front.

Chilton lifted a hand. Everyone fell silent.

"I am sure, everyone here knows why we have gathered," he started, running his hands over the podium and the tome that sat on it. There was a muttering of agreeing that rippled through the room.

"Mr. Graham," Chilton said, turning to address Will, who flinched at the shift in attention. "I am afraid I do not understand how you are here. Or why you are here. You had an obligation to this town, to these people. Why have you not completed your duty?"

His voice was soft and searching. It made Will want to claw his eyes out.

Focusing on his breathing to try and keep himself steady, Will hunched his shoulders further. “I was sent back.”

True, though probably a sad explanation for what had happened.

“Sent back?”

It was Jack this time. His words were practically a grunt. He was fighting to keep control over himself. He wanted to strangle the man. Will had read the desire from his fisted hands and bulging veins. They had been that way since they ran into each other on the trail.

Apparently, Chilton had sent them to recover what was left of Will’s remains.

Sensing Jack’s slipping of control, Chilton stepped back in. “Who sent you back Mr. Graham? Who was up at the Sacred Site with you?”

Hannibal’s name almost popped out, but no one here would know that name. And Will didn’t really want to give them it either.

He shifted, feet scraping against the white flooring. “The creature.”

Again, it felt like an incomplete answer, but they wouldn’t get any more out of him.

Jack sputtered. “The creature sent you back? Why? What did you do?”

Nothing was what Will was going to say, but Jack barrelled on before he had a chance to answer.

“You were chained to that place. Your job was to save the village, and instead you are rejected. You have endangered all of us by returning. You have condemned us.” Spittal flew from his lips from the sheer emotions. He was angry, but more than that, he was afraid. He was afraid of what it meant for Will to have been returned unharmed. And that was the more dangerous of the two.

“I was sent back,” Will said again, not knowing what else to say. His ears were bright red from all the staring and whispering.

Chilton tapped his fingers, eyes thoughtful as they took in the hunched man before him. “Why? Why were you sent back?”

Again, the priest used the coaxing voice that rankled Will.

“Because my stomach growled.”

Silence.

Whatever they had expected Will to say, it wasn’t that.

“W-what?”

It was the closest Will had ever heard Chilton close to stuttering. He ducked his head to hide his grin as he said, “My stomach growled and h—it found it impolite to let me remain hungry. I was sent back with the instructions to return tomorrow.”

Jack looked up to Chilton who was already looking down at him with the same bloodless expression. “It can speak?” His voice was hoarse and gruff, but it seemed to reach every corner of the temple anyways. People stirred, unease and tension rising.

Glancing up, Will could see that the priest didn’t have the answer. He could also see that Chilton wasn’t willing to admit that he didn’t know. Will dropped his gaze back to the floor before anyone noticed.

The Head Priest cleared his throat, hands running over the tome. “There are only a few records on the beast, most simply repeat the same thing and give no further information on it. Considering it took the gods stepping forward to lock it away, I am not wholly shocked that it possesses some intelligence as well as prowess. If it was stupid, the gods could have dealt with it in easier means. Or even a blessed human could have handled it.”

Will didn’t think *some* covered how intelligent Hannibal was. It was just as intelligent as any human, and no doubt more so. As Chilton said, it took the gods stepping in to handle it. But he didn’t say any of that.

There was a pause as the two men looked at each other and then to Will.

“It told you to return?” Chilton asked. Jack crossed his arms, brows furrowed as he studied the hunched man in front of them.

Will nodded, scuffing his boots against the floor.

“Did it tell you what would happen if you didn’t?”

Will shook his head, curls bouncing. “But I figure nothing good.”

Chilton hummed as whispers broke out among the people again.

“What’s there to say he isn’t lying?”

A new voice spoke up, to the right of Will. Tilting his head, he caught Mason Verger standing from his seat, one hand gripping the shoulder of his sister and the other gesturing wildly at Will. Margot kept her attention fixed at her feet. Bella sat in the row in front of them, looking distinctly displeased. Not that it was surprising. She had no love for the Vergers. Or for their son Mason. He was the reason she patched up many of the people she did.

Neither Bev nor Lucas were in attendance.

More whispers and some nodding of heads followed.

The priest and the mayor looked at each other, as though the thought hadn't occurred to them.

Sensing the interest in those around him, Mason smiled widely, putting his free hand on his hip. "No one was up there with him, right? He could have left before it ever showed up."

More murmurs of agreement.

"He couldn't have," Jack said suddenly, a look of resignation on his face. Every face turned to him, waiting for the next bit of information. "He was chained up there. And only the Head Priest has the keys to them."

Mason paused, clearly having no rebuttal for that. He shrugged, as if it didn't really matter in the end, and took his seat.

Jack sighed, rubbing his eyes. "It doesn't matter how he got back. What matters is what to do next."

"Kill him and send him back. Then you know it's done," said Mason, earning more whispers of agreement. Will wasn't surprised that was the first thing suggested, but he still shifted uncomfortably. How easily they were ready to kill him.

"We have to make sure the magic holds," another voice piped in.

"It's not like we have a choice," said another.

"We're just following tradition."

"It's the only way to keep the village safe."

"It's clear that we can't trust *him* to do what needs to be done."

More people started to talk, voicing their agreement for Mason's idea. At this rate, it would be the village that killed him. Even Jack didn't look to be against it, though his wife was giving him the evil eye. Will could feel it razing the side of this neck as it passed him for Jack.

"I am afraid, I cannot allow that."

Chilton, who had been watching quietly as the people talked, suddenly spoke up in Will's defense. Not that it was relieving. But everyone fell silent, waiting for the Head Priest's opinion.

Taking his time, Chilton came around the podium, moving to stand next to Jack. He brushed the wrinkles from his robes before folded his hands in front of him, taking on a serine look. "As we are all well aware, it has to be the beast that does the killing. Not us. His death would be rendered useless if we step in, which means that the magic would not be restored and another would have to be chosen."

“Who says we have to follow tradition?” Mason asked, crossing his arms as he looked down his nose at Chilton. He had little love for the gods or religion as a whole. He gave a crooked grin, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

“If you would like to put the village in danger, please be my guest,” Chilton said kindly, smiling at the young man.

Mason’s smile slipped, eyes darting around as the people’s emotions shifted to reluctance. Then, he smiled again, raising his hands in defeat. “Just a thought.”

Will couldn’t stop the small sigh of relief.

Chilton nodded in silent acceptance. “As simple as it might make it, I fear the effectiveness of it. However,” he said, walking forward till he stood next to Will, “I believe we should, for now, heed the request of the beast. Mr. Graham shall simply return to the mountain tomorrow.”

Apprehension broke out, most anxious at the idea of waiting to take care of the problem. Or the idea of leaving Will till his own devices till then.

“Do you think that’s for the best?” Jack asked, voice low, meant just for Chilton.

Turning, the priest evaluated the mayor before patting Will on the shoulder. He had to fight not to cringe away from the touch. “Mr. Graham has been released for a day and is expected to return tomorrow. I cannot speak for the rest of you, but I do not wish to face the wrath of a creature that it took the gods' interference to put away.”

That seemed to work.

“What if he runs?” Jack asks, eyes sharp on Will. He saw the moment when Will had wanted to run. When he almost had. Now Jack didn’t trust him not to at the first chance.

Chilton wasn’t phased by the question. “We have rooms here in the temple that have no windows and doors that lock from the outside.”

A cell. That was a cell if Will had ever heard of one.

“He can rest in one until tomorrow.”.

No. Will would rather be chained to a tree for a night, or sent back up to the altar, than be locked in a room within Chilton’s reach. The priest had been trying to get Will in his grasp for years now. Will had no intention of letting him slip into his grip now.

“I think we can trust him enough to let him sleep in his own home.”

Will’s head snapped around, eyes wide as Bella’s voice cut in. She rose from her seat, back ramrod straight and hands clasped in front of her. Jack choked at his wife’s words. Though he wasn’t the only one.

“Mrs. Crawford,” Chilton addressed her, shocked.

Bella was typically quiet, keeping her opinions to herself unless prompted. She tended to be the embodiment of grace and containment. The complete opposite of her husband. But now, from the stern set of her features, everyone knew that she was about to dig her heels into her voiced belief. She was the one person Jack could never truly beat, and everyone knew it.

“You wish for Mr. Graham to reside in his own home?”

Moving out from the pew, Bella approached the center of the semicircle, Chilton backing away to give her room. She stopped next to Will, who was still staring at her, slack mouthed. “Yes.”

Chilton hesitated, not expecting such a firm answer from such a soft-spoken woman. “And your reasoning?”

“Don’t you feel as though it is everyone’s right to stay within their own home?”

“Of course. But do you not fear that Mr. Graham might run—”

“No.”

Stunned silence. Bella was never one to interrupt others either.

TIlting her head to one side, she eyed both her husband and the priest as she looped her arm through Will’s. He was too stunned to do more than shift his cloak to the other arm.

“If you were afraid he would run, you would have moved him into one of those rooms the day his name was drawn.” Her words were cool and calm, ringing clearly through the temple. She was not about to be ignored. “Considering you didn’t, I think it can be assumed that you do not actually fear Will running. Doing so now is nothing but an insult to him.”

Will didn’t have it in him to tell her that he was going to run. And then her husband found him.

Though Jack looked close to telling her himself. But one look from his wife had him swallowing whatever words he was preparing to spew.

“I would hope, Head Priest,” Bella went on before either of the men could speak up, lifting a single eyebrow, “that you would have the kindness to allow a man to rest inside a place where he is most comfortable. Especially when they are sacrificing so much for others.”

Murmurs of agreement from behind them. Will had forgotten about the presence of everyone else. His heart had been pounding hard enough to drown out almost everything else.

Both the men looked at each other, knowing they were beaten. Not that Jack was surprised. He knew the moment his wife decided to step forward, she would get what she wanted in the end. She always did with him, even if that had more to do with the fact that he loved her so deeply than anything else.

Chilton cleared his throat, smoothing out his robe again. “Are you willing to vouch for him?”

Jack’s head whipped around to glare at the priest, and audible gasps could be heard around the room.

To vouch was more than simple backing up one's character. It was an agreement to take the place or punishment of the one they vouch for if they do not uphold their end of the deal. If Will runs, it would be Bella who would have to go up the mountain. If he ran, and she took his place, the village would have no healer.

“Wa—”

“Yes,” Bella said, smiling before Will could stop her. She squeezed his hand, like that was meant to reassure him. But if anything went wrong, whether he meant them to or not, it would be her head on the chopping block. “I will vouch for him.”

Chilton looked appeased, but if looks could kill, Will would be dead on the spot from the look Jack was giving him. More whispering. No one could believe what had just happened. Not even Will believed what had happened.

Noise rose as the townsfolk started talking. They stood and started to disperse, sensing that the meeting was concluded. Bella remained at his side, keeping close, even when Jack approached. If anything, she budged closer, eyes narrowing at her husband in warning.

Jack stopped in front of them, almost looming over them. Not that he was that much taller than either, but he was broader and bigger than them. Pitching his voice low, so only they could hear, Jack growled, “Mark my words, your return does not bode well. You will bring disaster to all of us.”

Will couldn’t bring himself to disagree, too stunned to do much of anything. He stared down at his cloak, counting the number of frayed spots within the material. If he thought he’d be around for another winter, he would start collecting material to fix it.

Bella didn’t have the same problem as Will. Calmly and without a word, she gave him a chastising look before reaching out and smacking him upside the head.

~TBC~

Chapter End Notes

May I present to the court, Bella Crawford. A lady who takes no shit and gives no shit.

Rumors

Chapter Summary

Bella and Will talk. Then Mason and Jack talk. And people just talk in general.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the late update!

Honestly, this chapter was harder to write. I had to fight the urge to barrel through this and get to Hannibal and Will again. But I've been told patience is a virtue. I guess we'll find out! And you know, need to plot build and all that extra world building stuff. Probably necessary.

TW: mentions of child abuse, bullying

Not beta read

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rumors had already spread throughout the village before Will made it back to his home. Bella walked with him, keeping up a steady stream of conversation about nothing of real importance. Just what herbs she was out of or low on, and which she would need to go searching the woods for and those she would need to travel to the next town over for. Most were familiar to him. He'd collected a fair few of them over the years. He tended to stumble across small thatches, spending more time in the woods than anyone else. He'd collect them and take them to Bella, knowing she'd be able to do something with them. And he always got some of the medicine in payment of what they were used to create. It was a fair trade.

Bella's arm was still looped through his, head up and back straight. Jack had remained behind after her admonishment, deciding it was better if he didn't accompany them.

Bella met the stare of anyone who looked for too long at them, a wide, if sharp smile, directed at them. She was daring anyone to come up and say something.

People wandered aimlessly, eyes darting to the pair and then away. Many wanted to approach Will, but didn't want to do so with the mayor's wife standing right there. Especially after she'd agreed to vouch for him.

It made him uneasy.

Jack's words hadn't been missed, even when he'd spoken softly. Everything echoed in the temple. It only took a few hearing his warning before it had spread like a wildfire.

Distrust and paranoia simmered in the air. Too low to be noticed by anyone but Will.

Bella didn't rush, taking on a leisurely pace, dress rustling with her movements. Even with the sun having warmed the air, to the point that sweat dotted Will's skin if he moved too fast, she was still bundled up in her cloak, gloves pulled on. It was worrisome. And he wasn't the only one who'd noticed.

Whispers of her being ill had grown with time. They had always circulated, with Bella having a tendency to fall ill at the changing of the seasons, but with no seriousness behind the words. It was always followed with being justified with it 'just being that time of year' or her 'having more delicate senses.' Only this winter, she'd fallen ill and hadn't bounced back.

Now that they were edging their way into spring, a short mention of her health around a tankard had moved to being whispered in small huddles during the day. Now they watched her, noting the tired smudges under her eyes or slower movements.

The words were always filled with pity.

Or condescension, believing she should have taken a disciple long before now. Not that either were ever explicitly expressed directly to her. People knew how well she'd take that.

And now she walked with a smooth gait, refusing to let their words drag her down.

Bella continued to speak idly, until they reached Will's home. By this point, most had gone back about their daily responsibilities, leaving them alone. "So, the beast is polite."

Will glanced over at her, catching her curious look, the smile finally replaced with thoughtfulness. He paused, extracting his arm from hers. They faced one another, Bella looking him in the face and Will staring at the silver clasp on her cloak.

"He seems to be excessively so," Will said, dropping his gaze to his hands, watching as they wrung together. Throughout their exchange, Hannibal had always remained polite. Which seemed a direct contradiction to the fact he was going to kill Will. "Out of everything, he wanted me to be courteous. He didn't approve when I wasn't."

"He?" Bella prompted, shifting closer to Will.

Will glanced sideways, back to the village to make sure no one else was near. He didn't know what kind of rumors would spread if the others heard this conversation. No one was near, but Will still took a few steps closer to his house, till he had one foot on his front steps. Both of the steps were chipping along the edges, the wood splitting from the weather and time. They needed to be replaced, like many other things in his home.

Eyes landing on Bella's throat, he noted how thin it was. How her jaw bone seemed to be more prominent now. She had lost weight. "He told me his name. Wanted to know mine. He was intelligent. Terrifyingly so."

Bella's fingers reached up to trace over her lips in thought. Those dark eyes dipped down, tracing over the footprints left in the exposed dirt. It wouldn't be too long now before it was covered in rich grass. "The Head Priest never made any mention of that."

Will snorted, shoving a hand through his curls. He stomped on the step, listening to the thud and watching the wood quiver under the abuse. "Yeah, well, after today, I don't think Chilton knows much of anything." And now he wondered if the Ritual was even necessary to keep Hannibal in. Or if they had been doing it wrong since the beginning.

How ironic would that be. Willingly, and unnecessarily, feeding the beast that had been locked away to keep them safe.

"What does it look like? There's never been much known about it," Bella asked, looking back up to Will, noting the pinch in his brows and anger in the set of his shoulders.

She could not fault him for his anger. Life had dealt him an ugly hand. She knew he lost his mother at a young age, and then was uprooted for most of his younger years before settling here. Because of his differences, and being an outsider, he'd not been able to integrate with the others, which ended with him bruised and excluded most of the time.

There was a period of time Bella would find him curled behind the barrels that sat by the backdoor of her shop. He never came in and never directly asked for help, but she'd seen it. Seen it in the busted lip and swollen eye. In the mud and grime that coated his pale skin and knotted his hair. In the thin body, skin pulled so tight, bone could be seen. It got to the point she would check regularly throughout the day so that he wouldn't be left there for hours on end.

And then one day, he just stopped showing up.

She never asked about it, and he never told her, but she knew it had to do with Mr. Graham, his father. He'd been sharper around the edges than Will, the loss of his wife turning him jagged and harsh.

Then even he was taken from Will. Though, she wasn't sure if that was a true loss, even if it wasn't an easy loss.

But now, after everything, he was being asked to die. And to do so gratefully. Someone had a twisted sense of humor.

She watched as he shrugged, stomping again on the step. His gaze dropped back to her feet. "Don't know. He didn't want me to take my blindfold off. And told me to wear it again tomorrow when I go back."

Bella hummed, folding her hands in front of her, tilting her head back to look up at the cloudless sky. Pale blue, with the sun shining unencumbered down on them.

Like this, the dark circles under Bella's eyes seemed to be starker. It made Will want to ask. If she was feeling alright. If she planned to take Alana as an apprentice. If she felt the pressure from those around her. If she needed help gathering herbs.

But, he couldn't bring the words to pass his lips. It was a taboo topic. It would inspire more rumors about her flagging health.

And rumors could be deadly.

"Interesting."

Bella's voice was soft, thoughtful, pulling Will out of his own head. Like her mind was miles away, even if her body was here.

Will looked at her, and then passed, noting that Jack was standing a ways away, watching. There was no telling how long he'd been there, watching the two.

His arms were crossed, brows lowered, leaning against one of the homes. He looked as though he was chewing on something sour with the way his mouth was twisted up. He clearly wanted them to end their conversation, but didn't want to get too close. Not that Will could blame him. Bella was in fine form this morning, and wouldn't let any of his shit slide.

"What do you think of him?"

Will's attention shot back to Bella. "Of Hannibal?"

Bella's eyebrows shot up at the name, and Will went red. He hadn't meant to let that slip.

"So, he has a name," she said, and then her lips curled into a smile. Soft and secret, like she knew something he didn't. "You didn't mention that in the meeting."

Shuffling uncomfortably, Will moved so he stood on the step, scraping his boots on the edge. "Would it have changed anything?"

They both knew it wouldn't have. "Did you want to tell the others?" Bella asked instead.

No. He hadn't. Especially not Chilton.

The Head Priest was greedy. He was able to decipher so little about the creature in the mountain. He was no doubt salivating to know more about the thing up there. It was likely another reason why he had wanted Will trapped in the same building as him. Knowing that the thing could speak was probably a revelation, even if it made sense.

If the creature hadn't been intelligent, it was doubtful that the gods would have needed to step in to stop it. They probably would have sent in a human to do the job.

But it was curious that the gods *hadn't* killed him. Will thought it would have been easier for them to just kill him, rather than imprison him. Maybe they wanted to inflict a crueler fate. The gods were not known for their mercy. For their power, yes. But not for their mercy.

Maybe mercy was too human a trait.

Then again, many in the village didn't seem to know mercy. Will rubbed a hand over his arms, fingers running over the scars from years of conflict. Being different often meant that

mercy was a luxury, rather than an expectation.

Fingering a long scar on his forearm, Will wondered if Hannibal knew mercy. Or if that was a foreign concept to him as well.

“He’s interesting,” Will finally said, answering her original question, mind returning to their conversation. On the fact he was sent home because his stomach growled, and Hannibal found it rude to keep him when he couldn’t feed him. “Even if he plans to kill me.”

Bella hummed, amusement coloring the noise. Humor danced along her features. She took a step forward, head tilted to the side as she ran a careful gaze over the quiet man. “As far I know, you’ve never once thought of someone as interesting.”

Will paused his fidgeting.

As much as he would like to deny it, there was some truth to it. Lo was probably as close as he got. But even then, this was different. While there were some mysteries to his friend, it never inspired Will to try and find out more. He was content to let him keep his secrets.

But Hannibal was different. He could feel his own curiosity burning low. And with enough intensity to try and sate.

He wanted to know why Hannibal was locked away. How long he’d been there. What he looked like. What exactly he was. Those were only the start too.

“And clearly he finds you interesting too, if you’re standing here,” Bella commented, tone falling serious. Apprehension pulled at her features, lips pressing together into a hard line. As though something had just occurred to her. “You’ll want to be careful about that.”

Will took another step up, hand reaching for the doorknob. Jack was getting impatient. He was shifting where he stood, taking a half step forward, before taking another half step back. He’d repeated the process three times already. It wouldn’t be long before he couldn’t stand it any more and would march on over to try and pull Bella away.

And Will was done being around people. Especially him. Even if he liked Bella, he didn’t have it in him to socialize much longer. He wanted to just sleep. And eat. His stomach was gnawing at him for food.

“Why? I’m dead regardless.”

“Because, whatever he is, he isn’t human. And there are always consequences when humans and Others mingle for too long. You know this. There are no happy endings between gods and humans. And while this thing isn’t a god, he certainly isn’t human. There is no predicting the rippling effects.”

Will wanted to say that he wasn’t facing a happy ending anyways, that it was clear what his consequence would be. But he didn’t. Instead he nodded, one quick jerk, eyes averted, and head bent down, before disappearing inside his home.

He wanted to sleep and not think of anything for a good while.

———

Rumors were living things.

If fed, they grew and morphed and changed.

If starved, they shrunk and withered and died.

There were some that were weak from the start and died, regardless of how often they were spoken of. Others were more resilient, lasting through years even without needing to be mentioned. And now some of those were being fed at the only bar and inn in town.

A number of the villagers had gathered at the *Hogs Head* for an evening drink, most feeling the need for one with how the day had unraveled. The place was busier than it had been in a long time.

The inn had taken to leaning during the years, its aged wood unable to support itself evenly. The old wood creaking during bad storms, and the chandelier above swaying. The heavy wooden ceiling beams sat low, inspiring the fear of whacking your head on one while also making the place feel a bit like a cave. The beams would shake dust and spiders free when the place got too rambunctious. Like it was warning its occupants to calm down before it came down.

A hog's head hung over the stone fireplace, the large tusks curling out. Deer antlers framed it on either side, doting the rest of the walls in decoration. The same family had owned this place for generations, and whenever it was passed on to the next descendent, the new owner had to bring in their own rack to add to the collection. It was considered a rite of passage.

The bar sat directly in front of the door, large barrel casks sitting behind it. Despite what it looked like, only one kind of ale was offered. And no wine. No one could get grapes to grow, and even if they could, none of them knew how to make wine. And then the innkeeper, Garrett Hobbs, found it too expensive to try importing it. It was easier and cheaper just not to bother.

Lanterns sat on the round tables, offering more light than the chandelier could offer. There was only a little oil in each. It was too expensive to keep them full, and it was more of a fire hazard when people got drunk. When they ran out, it told people it was time to leave. The lanterns casted long shadows, hiding the dirt and grime that covered the rickety flooring. People gathered in groups around them, heads tipped forwards as they drank and talked quietly amongst themselves as they went over today's events.

Jack sat alone in one corner, observing the room silently as he sipped from his own cup. He had no plans of staying long, but knowing tonight would be packed, he felt he needed to come. To keep an eye on things.

Bella had declined to join him. She'd given him a soft kiss before telling him she wanted to mix up some ointments and would probably turn in early. While that may have been true, he'd also seen the exhaustion lining her face. The day had worn on her more than she

admitted, though he could see it. He could see her slipping away from him, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

And it made him angry.

Angry at the Fates for being cruel. Angry at himself for being useless. Angry at Bella who seemed to have accepted her fate with grace and serenity.

But he'd kissed her forehead softly before heading out.

Loud, riotous laughter interrupted his thoughts. It interrupted most conversations, turning heads to see what was going on.

Mason, Tobias, and Randall clustered around a table near the fireplace, well into their third tankard of ale. The waitress, Abigail Hobbs, a slight girl who tended to try and blend into the background, was doing her best to keep clear. She only approached when they yelled for another round.

Her blue eyes watched them sharply, face drawn and dark hair pulled back out of her face. She was ready to get her father at a moments noticed if they started to get out of hand.

She was the only child of Garrett, and would be inheriting the inn eventually. Jack had seen the pair going out in the early mornings. He didn't doubt that the man was teaching his daughter the art of the hunt. Along with any other useful tidbits he knew. He'd confided in Jack a few times how he worried for her. Worried how she would fare once he and his wife were gone.

It was a fear Jack once thought he would experience.

Watching the three men howl and cackle, whispering and jabbing one another, Jack knew he'd need to keep an eye on them. They were always boisterous and crude, but the alcohol made them worse in some ways. Bolder. And with Mason's family being absurdly wealthy for where they lived, they could make Jack's life more difficult if they felt he was being an inconvenience to them. Even if he was the mayor.

Money and goods had more sway than any title could in some ways.

Mason's gold hair glinted in the firelight, his beady eyes swiveling around the room, tracking the movements of everyone. He always wore a grin that made Jack want to punch his teeth in most of the time. He wore the look of a man who was being benevolent by gracing others with his presence.

Bella certainly had no tolerance for the boy. She only held her piece because she knew it would cause problems for her husband.

Thoughts back on his wife, Jack stared down at his drink, staring at his reflection and the way the firelight played along the surface. He really should be home, with his wife, spending time with her. While they didn't speak of it, they both knew her days were numbered and

dwindling fast. And even if they didn't speak of it, it became clear when Bella agreed to take Alana on as an apprentice.

But as mayor, it was his job to take care of the town. To reassure them when things seemed uncertain. And with Will returning today, things were beyond uncertain. Not once in their history had a sacrifice ever been sent back. Especially with orders to return the next day. There was no sense in it.

If the creature was going to kill him, why hadn't it done so today?

It didn't sit well with Jack.

Everything up to this point said that the sacrifice had to die before sunrise on the allotted day. Yet, Will returned unharmed, and so far nothing had happened. But his instincts told him something was wrong. That there was something coming.

Taking a sip, he scanned the patrons again, noting the worry and tension that hung around. They seemed to feel it too, even when they couldn't put a finger on it.

Maybe tomorrow he should follow Will up, make sure that he did indeed return to the Sacred Site. That he'd been telling the truth today.

While it was true that only Jack had the key to the chains, they were also centuries old. They could have easily been rusted enough for Will to break them. He hadn't seen anything wrong with them when he'd chained the man, but it had also been dark. He could have missed it.

Whether Will was telling the truth or not, none of this boded well.

But, he at least needed to appear collected and calm. It wouldn't do to let the townsfolk know of his own uneasiness.

More laughter from the group, and then, those beady eyes slid over to Jack. Mason lifted his chin up in greeting, smiling crookedly. "'Lo Jack," he said, leaning back in his chair to cross his arms. Randall and Tobais copied the movement, all three now looking at Jack. Which meant the rest of the people in the room were looking at him too.

He grunted a greeting, taking another long drink from his cup. He'd rather not get tangled in that group unless he had to.

But Mason wasn't going to let him go that easily.

The young man slid out of his seat, taking his time to straighten the sleeves of his shirt and sort out his cloak, drawing attention to the quality of it. The deep rich coloring that denoted its expense without ever mentioning it. One fixed, he grabbed his cup and sauntered over, slipping into the empty seat across from Jack.

They stared at each other, feeling the weight of everyone's attention.

Mason toyed with the handle of his cup, running his fingers up and down it as he watched Jack. The mayor said nothing, choosing to huff loudly and lean back in his seat. He wore

indifference and annoyance poorly. The younger man could almost smell his unease. How much he wanted to be anywhere but where he was.

“So, everyone has been talking,” Mason said slowly, moving his fingers to run them over the rim of his cup, “and they’ve been very curious about what you meant today. Would you care to enlighten us? Might help alleviate some of the insecurity people are feeling.”

Jack focused on keeping his breathing even, grunting as he took another swig. The room was dead quiet as they all waited for Jack to respond. Whatever he said would be known by everyone in an hour. Even Garrett had come out from the kitchen to lean against the doorway, rubbing his hands over his apron. Abigail stood next to him, turned like she wanted to disappear into the kitchen, even though her feet kept her rooted next to her dad.

Setting his cup down, Jack eyed the man. “I don’t know what you mean.” Playing ignorant was the wisest move at the moment. He didn’t know what Mason wanted, but it wouldn’t be anything good.

“Oh come on,” the younger man crowed, splaying his arms wide before snapping forward to brace them against the table. “We all heard what you said to that Graham boy. How he was going to bring disaster to all of us.” The words were drawled out, an eyebrow lifted in emphasis, before he gave another grin. Jack snorted at the fact that Mason referred to Will as ‘boy.’ They were close in age. “We’re all very curious about what you meant. If the Head Priest had said something that foretold that? I think we have the right to know, if that’s the case, no? After all, it’s about all of us then, isn’t it?”

He was hedging. For whatever reason, Mason wanted to inspire panic.

The very opposite of anything Jack wanted.

Leaning back in his seat, Jack crossed his arms, leveling a harsh glare. “No, we haven’t talked about it. The Head Priest hasn’t noted anything wrong, so he doesn’t believe the heavens are angry. Right now he’s at peace with waiting it out.”

It was complete bullshit. He didn’t know what Chilton thought. Hadn’t bothered to ask. All he knew for sure was that the man was pissy about the fact that he hadn’t managed to get Will locked away in his temple.

“Doesn’t *believe* ? Seems kinda shaky, doesn’t it? Relying on one man to determine whether the greater beings that be are angry at us for something we couldn’t control,” Mason pointed out, tapping his fingers against the table.

Jack didn’t look away from him, but he felt the rippling effects of his words on the others. Agitations and disquiet spiked. The damn brat was about to cause him a bucket full of problems. And Jack didn’t have time for that. He had a wife to be with.

Jack chuckled, though it didn’t hide the sharp edge when he spoke. “You’ve never had a problem with it before. Not even when your name could have been pulled from the bowl. Why are you so concerned now?”

Mason jerked back, throwing his hands up in a surrendering motion. He gave a cheeky grin, looking around to the others in the room. Jack settled back in his seat, waiting for the boy to speak again,

“Well~” Mason sang, folding his hands back in his lap, “up to this point, not all of our lives were on the line. I just want to know what you think, since it’s clear that you have your own concerns with Graham being back.”

“I have no concerns.”

A lie, but one he’d die with. He wasn’t about to let this brat have his way.

Mason’s eyebrows shot up. He leaned forward, putting his chin in his hand as he looked at the mayor. He might have been attractive, but the acidity that lingered behind the skin bubbled through the surface, tainting him. Now, it showed through his eyes. They practically danced with mischief.

Jack wasn’t sure how a set of twins could be so different. Margot barely made a peep most of the time. She was disinterested in everything. She didn’t get into trouble and more importantly she didn’t cause trouble. Mason, on the other hand, was always causing trouble. Jack had lost track of how many times his family had needed to pay off another to keep trouble away from their door.

Will’s father was the only one they weren’t ever able to pay off. Though the man never caused trouble regardless. He never did take an interest in what was happening to his son.

Might be why the boy turned out so weird.

But it had made the Vergers nervous. They didn’t like someone they couldn’t keep in their pocket if needed. Jack had managed not to take anything from them. He didn’t want to consider what he’d do if presented the option either.

Bella would have his head if he did. And the Vergers would have his pride.

Sighing, Jack took another long drink. He was almost finished with it. Another swallow or two.

“Come on, Jack,” Mason coaxed, cocking his head to the side. “We all know that Graham has always made you nervous. You’ve always known he was a bad egg. Came from a bad lineage too. It’s not like anyone here is surprised.”

Murmured agreement followed his words.

Franklin Graham hadn’t ever been anyone’s cup of tea. He was prickly and rude most of the time. Never said more words than necessary and kept to himself most of the time. His son had some of his tendencies, though he was a different kind of prickly. He at least wasn’t as rude as his father had been.

Weirder though. For multiple reasons. And he made people uneasy in ways his father never had.

Jack shifted, letting his eyes wander the room. Most were staring at their lanterns, pretending they weren't listening in on the conversation. Shadows danced along the wall. The hog's head seemed to loom over the room. Abigail had disappeared into the kitchen, but Garrett had taken up his post behind the bar, wiping it down, though his eyes were fixed on them. Tobias and Randall hadn't moved from their seats.

At this rate, by morning, everyone would be talking about how terrible a person Will Graham was. All they needed was for Jack to confirm what Mason had eluded to.

Jack was being baited. And he didn't take well to being baited.

"Bad egg? Is that right?" Jack asked, waiting for Mason to nod, before continuing, his voice coming out as a growl, "I would think you would be more careful about calling others a bad egg considering."

Considering the number of times your parents have needed to save you.

Considering the number of times you almost got thrown out of town.

Considering how many people hate you.

Were all things left unsaid, but were heard regardless. No one whispered their agreement, but their unnatural stillness betrayed them.

Mason's face hardened, an ugly look crossing his face briefly before that irritating smile was back in place. "Careful mayor. Might give people the wrong impression defending someone who could bring our ruin."

Even now, words were being muttered between people. There was no telling what rumors would spread from that. Jack was sure he'd hear about it from his wife soon enough.

And as much as Jack hated it, Mason wasn't wrong.

Jack had his suspicions that ruin is exactly what Will would bring. Had since the first, and only, time the boy had made eye contact with him. There was something unnatural about him. And while Chilton had always called it a blessing, Jack could never agree.

There was something dark in that boy.

And Jack worried that the monster had seen it. Even with the blindfold on, it had been able to sense it when they'd met. That was why he'd been allowed to live. Because it was curious, or because it saw a kindred spirit.

Neither was a good thing.

But Jack didn't say that. He took one last drink from his cup, finishing off the rest of his drink. He dug in his pocket and threw some coins on the table. He stood and tipped his head in thanks to Garrett, before turning his attention back to Mason, giving him the evil eye. The brat was trying to work the people up for reasons he didn't know. And not knowing what Mason was up to was worrisome.

There could be a thousand reasons he wanted to do it. And it could be something as simple as because he wanted to. Or as disbelievable as him actually being worried about the village. Jack would bet he was just worried about his one hide.

When he spoke, Jack made sure to speak loud enough that everyone heard. “I don’t know why you’re so concerned Mason. Will is going back up the mountain tomorrow, and all that worrying you’ve done will have led to nothing but adding wrinkles to your brow.” Jack emphasized his point by reaching across and tapping Mason lightly between the eyebrows.

Mason jerked back, hissing lightly at the touch. For as much as the boy liked to poke and prod, he certainly didn’t like it when the favor was returned.

Jack gave him a broad smile, even when his eyes were ice cold, before sweeping out of the inn, leaving a trail of whispers behind him. He had better places to be.

Like with his darling wife.

~TBC~

Chapter End Notes

Jack gives me a headache for a lot of reasons, but there's no denying that he does love his wife. How'd it feel getting a short POV from Jack? Interesting? Annoying? Curious?

All three is an acceptable answer too.

Like most things in my writing, it sort of just happened. Whoops.

Becoming

Chapter Summary

Hannibal pokes at Will

Chapter Notes

Hi lovelies and handsomlies!

I am so sorry about my sudden disappearance. I did not mean to leave you guys hanging like that.

Sometimes life sucks for reasons outside of your control and my life had a small implosion. I've been trying to collect everything back together these past few months, but that means I haven't been able to do any writing at all. This chapter is the first time I've really been able to sit and write anything.

With that being said, I apologize in advance for how rough it is. I really struggled with this chapter, and I wasn't sure if it was the long break or what I was trying to accomplish in this chapter that made it harder. I might need to go in a change some things as I start to get in the rhythm again. I'm hoping to get back into the habit of getting something posted every week to every other week, but you're probably going to have to be patient with me! Hopefully you'll enjoy it anyways!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will hadn’t known what to expect when he returned to the Sacred Site. Or, at least he didn’t know what to completely expect.

Seated back on the altar, blindfold around his eyes, Will waited. With his eyes covered, there was no telling how long he’d waited. Maybe an hour. It could also have been no more than twenty minutes. Some birds were singing, giving the air of spring being around the corner.

He’d arrived just as the sun crested the horizon, the sky hazy pinks and golds blending lazily together. Some clouds dotted the expanse, the only warning of a possible storm. The low sun casted deep shadows over the statues, throwing them into sharp angles and twisted shapes, warping their features into something further grotesque and hateful. The woman kneeling at the corner of the altar looked like she was recoiling in disgust and hate, rather than fear. Will pretended not to notice as he sat down.

His knee bounced, fingers tapping against the rock. The chill of the rock turned his fingers stiff, slowing their movements. It seeped through his clothes too, sending goosebumps across his arms and legs and locking up his joints. His back and hips ached from sitting still for so long, and the cold only made it more prominent. Shifting his weight only alleviated the ache for brief moments, and those were getting shorter.

If he wasn't blindfolded, or if there wasn't a drop that would kill him, he'd have been up, wandering around the statues, letting his hands map their features and forms. Being idle had never suited him. His mind always got too loud when he was still. There was always something he could be doing to keep his focus elsewhere. He'd spent almost all of his leisure time at the river, gathering food, or working on his to-do list for his home. Tasks that allowed him to remain mindless.

After returning home from the temple, he'd been surprised to find that his things had remained untouched. Even his shed. The only thing gone was the bear rug. Someone had gone in and cleaned it up. Swept, removed the cobwebs. Small things that he never got around to doing.

Bella was the most likely culprit. She always did like to mother him.

A soft scraping alerted Will to Hannibal's arrival. Sitting up out of his slouch, Will's fingers paused. His head turned in the direction of the noise that was steadily getting closer.

"Good morning, Will," Hannibal greeted pleasantly, his voice soft.

"Hello, Hannibal."

"I apologize for being late. I did not intend to keep you waiting, but I am afraid I had matters to attend to first," Hannibal said as he sat next to Will, taking a moment to adjust. There was the sound of movement, once again giving off the impression that while Hannibal was sitting right next to Will, he was also somehow behind him. "Tomorrow, it might be constructive to wait a little longer before coming."

Thinking back, it had been the same the day before. Hannibal hadn't shown up right away. Will swallowed the urge to ask what he could possibly have to do that would keep him. He doubted there was much to do in a cave. Then again, if Hannibal had been trapped there for thousands of years, there was no telling what he'd somehow squirreled away with time.

And then Will realized what he'd said.

"Tomorrow?"

His knee paused it's bouncing as he shifted to look in Hannibal's general direction. Hannibal was keen on keeping Will around. Unease ran down his spine. Nothing good ever came from associating with anything Other. Gods included.

Not that Will tended to have a lot of good happen to him, but interacting with something like Hannibal was a bad idea.

“Of course. I’m sure you have other things you must attend to in the mornings. Pushing your arrival back by an hour will do no harm. If anything, it will be more beneficial to the both of us,” Hannibal said airly, clearly oblivious to Will’s confusion. Or ignoring it. Being unable to read his expression, Will wasn’t able to tell, though he doubted Hannibal missed much. “It will allow you to do any chores you need to handle, as well as avoiding climbing up here in the dark. I would recommend you try to avoid that. While there is a path, it is dangerous.”

Will’s lips pressed together. Jack and the rest were not going to be happy to hear this. If they believed him at all. Will couldn’t blame them for doubting. No record of this happening before existed. Giving him one more day had already spread unease through the town. Going down and telling them that Hannibal didn’t have current plans to kill him at all would sign his death warrant.

Someone would do the job, even if it wasn’t the beast on the mountain.

Deciding not to point that out, Will asked, “And how does it benefit you?”

He could have sworn that Hannibal was smiling when he said, “Dear William, it keeps me from making you wait on me.”

“Why would that be a problem?”

“It would be impolite to keep a guest waiting.”

“So I’m a guest?”

“I am of the belief that you are what you choose to be.”

Will snorted, his leg bouncing hard. The sun must have risen completely above the horizon line by this point. He was beginning to feel warm under all his layers. Sweat dotted the back of his neck and the space between his shoulder blades. “Just because I believe I’m a grand artist doesn’t make me one. Neither does me believing I’m a bird allow me to fly like one.”

When he was younger, Will would spend time watching birds when he hid from his father. He’d climb the trees, having found that people rarely looked up if they weren’t given a reason to. Huddled against the trunk, he’d watch the birds talk to one another or soar. He’d sit, curled tight, imagining he could sprout wings and take off, leaving everyone behind. Find a place of peace. Somewhere he could simply be and not have to worry about what others think.

But watching the finches and the hawks never allowed him to fly. His feet had always remained planted on the hard earth. His fingers twisted into his cloak as an old memory surfaced, a soft breeze stirring his hair. The taste of dirt and iron sat on the back of his tongue.

“Of course not,” Hannibal agreed, his arm brushing against Will’s as he adjusted. Will cleared his throat, hands pulling at the collar of his shirt. “However, believing you are above your peers allows you to act as if it were true, does it not? Have you not seen this within your village? The confidence those are imbued with when they think themselves higher. Believing

you are an honored guest rather than a straggling beggar or sacrifice changes the air around you. You convince those around you to believe as you do when you act in what you believe."

The sound of the birds singing swelled around Will. Mason and his group were a good example. Despite holding no place of power, they still acted as though they did. And Will had seen Mason change a room with just a few words. And it wasn't as though changing how one acted always changed how they were treated. He doubted even if he acted differently that the others would treat him any better.

Being kind, being awkward, being friendly, being offstandish. It never changed a damn thing.

The whistling of the birds died away as Will tucked one foot under his thigh. He pulled his cloak off his shoulders, plucking at the stray pieces he could feel hanging onto the hem. "This feels like a talk more about self-confidence."

"Confidence can go hand-in-hand with the belief coming to life, but no. It is not what I mean."

"But having confidence does not turn a beggar into a king," Will said, bringing the argument back to its weakest point. "It doesn't give you money or actual power. All it does is piss people off when they find out you've been lying to them."

"But is confidence not needed to be able to be who you are? Otherwise, won't you be reduced to something less? Always too scared of something out of your control to come into yourself?"

"Sometimes being scared of something outside of your control is called survival."

"And yet, it still leads to a slow death. The death of yourself, if not your actual life."

Will twisted to look in Hannibal's direction, anger burning low in his gut. While his tone had been neutral, if amiable, his words felt sharply pointed. "Being yourself led you here, right? Locked away forever. Some life this is. Others might consider this a worse life than living a life of restraint. What choices do you have here? What kind of life is this?"

Hannibal didn't respond right away, humming in thought. Long fingers pulled at Will's hair again, ghosting over his forehead. Will smacked his hand away, putting one hand protectively over his hair. "To burn brightly and die early, or to not burn at all and live for years on end. Death comes for all. I plan to greet her as an old friend, with no regrets. What is the purpose of regretting?"

"To learn."

"Then learn to be yourself. Why be prey when you were always meant to be the predator?"

Will's brows rose in disbelief, dropping his foot back to the ground. He'd been sitting on it long enough that his toes started to tingle. He absolutely hated that sensation. Of course

Hannibal would say that. Whatever Hannibal was, he wasn't prey. He probably had no idea what it was to be afraid. Or at least fear what he was capable of.

Sighing, Will stood, leaving his cloak on the altar. He took a step right and then left, unsure how far he could go but he couldn't stand sitting still any longer. Taking a few steps one way, he turned around and did the same in the opposite direction, hands outstretched to feel for statues before running into them.

Hannibal remained silent, but Will could feel him watching.

Taking slow steps over the path he'd checked, Will paced. He kept count of his steps to know when to turn.

After a few trips back and forth, feeling more comfortable within his space, Will said, "And how long did it take you to learn to be yourself? Did you just start knowing?" There was no mistaking the snark in his words.

"I was born with a firm foundation of who I am today, but no. My becoming came through blood and pain, as many others do. "

"Your becoming?" Will sneered, pausing to look to him.

"The becoming of myself of course." Hannibal's tone was matter of fact, clearly undeterred by Will's attitude. "Though, there are some who are simply born as they are, no help needed. You seem to be the former, rather than the latter, I'm afraid."

Will cocked his head to the side. The sun soaked through his skin, chasing away the chill of the morning. His hair tickled his nape as the wind ran through it.

"You think I don't know who I am?"

"I think you've hidden yourself under so many layers, there is no way for you to know who you are."

"Well, I'm no artist. I like dogs. I prefer fishing to hunting. I find the gods to be ridiculous most of the time, and priests all the time. And I don't think harm should be inflicted just for the sake of doing so. That sounds like I know myself."

"But that doesn't mean you don't think harm shouldn't ever be inflicted. So, dear Will, when should it?"

He was teasing. Will didn't need to see his expression to read that. He knew it by the way he shaped the words, but the lilt in the question. He knew it by the hum Hannibal drew out after, the way he sounded like he leaned towards him.

Hannibal was poking at him.

"You have to inflict pain to eat," Will said finally, thinking of all the fish and hares he's gutted. "But that doesn't mean you should do it just because you have the power."

“And if you believe one deserves it? That they deserve punishment. Should pain be inflicted then?”

Huffing, Will put his hands on his hips, tilting his head back to the sun. Of course he would ignore the point and pick one obscure detail to be philosophical on.

“Who am I to decide who should be punished?” Will asked softly, mind elsewhere.

There would always be multiple sides to a story. Everyone has a reason for the things they did, even if those reasons weren’t good. He had a sleuth of reasons he avoided people. Some of them were better than others. But that didn’t mean he didn’t hurt Bev or Bella when he rejected their invitations to dinner or to meet at the tavern. Should he be punished for rejecting them?

Hannibal shifted. “Why did they force you to cover your eyes, William?”

Blinking at the shift in conversation, Will crossed his arms, beginning to pace again. They had already talked about this. “Why are you asking again?”

“It is an easy question, Will.”

“Then why do you need me to answer?”

Hannibal clicked his tongue. “Humor me, as they say. Why do they not like your eyes?”

“I can see more than most. I just read people better than others,” Will said, giving a half shrug. “No one likes it when others know things they’re trying to keep secret.”

“And most wouldn’t know these things. At least, not with the individual coming forward with the information.”

Pursing his lips, Will nodded in agreement.

“Does that not make you more qualified to determine who should be punished and to what degree?” Hannibal mused, clearly amused with this line in conversation. “Would you not see every reason they might be punished, and see the whole story? Most humans only share pieces of themselves, keeping their deepest desires hidden. But this would not be a problem for you. You wouldn’t fall prey to punishing the wrong person, as many do.”

“Just because I can see a lot doesn’t mean I should be the one to judge others.” And that wasn’t something he ever wanted either. He was tired of being judged. Why would he want to spend his life judging others?

“And what if someone got away with a misdeed? What if the law didn’t see them as a criminal and they got away with their crime because no one could see the real them? Would you leave them be? Let them get away with all the harm they’d done?”

Will froze. Hannibal’s voice echoed in his head, like poison leaking through the cracks and turning everything pitch. His questions brought up ugly memories. His father sprawled in the river, the water roiling red as it ran past him. His eyes, the same hue as Will’s, stared toward

the heavens, seeing nothing. His skin had been ghostly, all the coloring having slipped away into the water.

“No, I don’t think you would,” Hannibal whispered, reading the sudden tension coiling in Will. A predator who was desperately trying to hold on to the skin of a prey. It was an interesting paradox. Usually, he found prey pretending to be predators. And some predators pretending to be prey. But never had he encountered something desperate to be prey. “I think you know yourself less than you would like to.”

“And you would know me better than myself after two days?”

Hannibal chuckled softly. “I have lived a very long time. You learn a thing or two about reading others in that time.”

“And you’re never wrong,” Will muttered under his breath. He doubted something or someone like Hannnibal ever admitted to being wrong. He could hear him saying something like he ‘miscalculated’ or some shit like that.

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” Hannibal said, laughter in his voice. He sounded a lot closer now, though Will hadn’t heard him move. The wind rustled the trees, causing a loud creaking to echo through the air as the branches gave under the pressure. A cry of a hawk sounded a ways off. It seemed like even birds stayed away from this place. “But no, it’s not often people surprise me anymore.”

“That’s basically the same thing.”

Silence. Long enough for Will to get uneasy. In some ways, it was easy to forget what Hannibal was. He didn’t actually know what he was, having never seen him. And talking to him was easier than even Bev. As much as Hannibal pushed and poked, Will felt the freedom in answering however he wanted. There was an ease that he didn’t have anywhere else. But the reality was that Hannibal was something Other. And something that had been locked away because of its bloodlust. Hannibal was a dangerous beast, even if he spoke like a civilized human.

Unsure about the sudden quiet, Will went back to pacing. Only to find that Hannibal was directly in front of him. Running straight into him, Will’s hands shot out to keep himself from falling. Cool skin and toned muscles of a human torso met his fingers. They shifted and pulled taut as Hannibal moved closer, his hands coming up to grab Will by the elbows.

He was shirtless.

It was the only thing Will’s brain could grab onto. Maybe it was because, even knowing Hannibal wasn’t completely human, the image he’d created of him didn’t involve him being naked, or even semi-naked. Hannibal’s mannerisms always created the image of the upper class. Aristocratic. Soft silk shirts, tunics of the brightest white or deepest purples, trimmed in gold or silver.

Will’s fingers spread wide across the skin, feeling it move as Hannibal breathed. He’d never been this close to another human. The only person he’d seen shirtless was his father, and his

father had been scrawny like him. All wiry muscles, hardened with lack of nutrition and hard work. Hannibal was something else entirely.

Hannibal's hands tightened around his elbows, bringing Will back to the present.

A flush rushed straight from his neck to his ears, turning them the brightest of reds.

Ripping his hands away and arms free of Hannibal's hold, Will tucked them behind his back, glaring in his direction. Anger felt better than embarrassment. "What the fuck, Hannibal? How about a warning next time?"

"I would apologize, but I'm afraid I would only be doing it again later. I was curious."

"What the hell could you be curious about?" Will seethed, backing away blindly. He almost fell on his ass when his calves hit a statue. His hand shot out and grabbed it to keep from falling. He leaned against it, head tilted up defiantly.

"If you could surprise me."

Will's brows lifted in incredulousness, his lips pressing into a hard line. Adjusting, he leaned against the statue, crossing his arms. "And did I?"

Hannibal hummed, pleased. "Of course. You have yet to fail to surprise me."

Breathing hard through his nose, Will chewed on his cheek to keep from saying something spiteful. He had to remind himself just how dangerous Hannibal was.

"Even now, you do what others don't. Instead of fearing me, you are angry. And you do a poor job of disguising it." A cool hand touched his chest, right over his raging heart. "Even knowing I could tear you in half, you still remain defiant."

Hannibal sounded more than simply pleased with it.

Will ignored that. While he hadn't known just how dangerous Hannibal was, it didn't surprise him. And it didn't do much to settle the anger in his chest. Hannibal had already said he didn't have current plans to kill him. His anger didn't seem like it would do much to push those plans forward. If any, Hannibal seemed pleased with his unfettered emotions.

"Good for you then. Happy to entertain," Will growled, pushing off the statue.

"What did you notice?" Hannibal prompted, curiosity heavy in his question.

"For the love of—" Will took a step forward, sure that Hannibal was right in front of him. He wouldn't be able to resist getting close. "That's what this was about?"

"What did you see about me?"

"From touching you for two seconds?"

Hannibal's silence was answer enough.

“Fine. You’re cool, even sitting in the sun, but you’re warmer than you were when your arm brushed against mine earlier. So, whatever you are, you aren’t warmblooded. You can’t retain heat easily, much like a snake or fish. And you’re human, at least in part, but you’re too—too long to be completely human.” There was no other way to explain it. Hannibal might be right before him, but Will could also hear him moving on the other side of the altar. Like a tail of a cat knocking against something.

“And?”

Will tipped his head down, thoughts running over when his hands had touched his skin. “Your skin isn’t like a humans. It’s smoother, and harder to the touch. And textured,” he said slowly. It wasn’t super noticeable, like that of a lizard. At least, not on his torso.

Hannibal hummed, encouraging him to keep going.

“You're cultured, or you at least were once considered part of the high-class. The way you speak, not just the words you choose, but your accent. It also explains your need to be polite and your round about way of saying things. It’s very elegant, almost artful,” Will said with a slight grin, before falling serious again. “And you're artistic in some form.”

“How do you know?”

Hannibal was poking again. He didn’t say Will was wrong, he just wanted him to prove how he knew.

“My first clue was the statues. They’re life-like. Carefully crafted. And as you pointed out, you don’t get visitors very often. So either they miraculously appear, or you make them. My second was your class. Most of those in the upper-class learn something of the arts. Music, dance, painting, depending on parents and what’s popular at the time. Typically, you learn the basics of all three.”

“And your third?”

Taking a deep breath, Will unconsciously touched his elbows where Hannibal had grabbed him. He could still feel the ghost of his hold around his skin. “Your hands. They have some calluses on your fingers. But, not from a blade.”

“Rather than sculpting, I have an affection for drawing. Charcoal specifically. Though, it has been quite some time since I have been able to enjoy it.”

Will could imagine. He doubted anyone would be generous enough to restock his supply once he ran out.

Running a hand through his hair, Will backed up till he bumped against a statue and let himself sag against it. It was even warmer now. Like the stones he would pull from the fire’s edge during the winter, when he’d wrap them up and place them at the foot of the bed to keep his feet warm. It sent warm sparks up his spine. “If you’re expecting anything more, you’ll be disappointed. Not being able to see you really limits what I can figure out.”

“Disappointed?” Will could almost hear Hannibal tilting his head to the side as he spoke. “Hardly. You proved my point.”

Will bit his tongue to keep from asking what point he meant. He knew that’s what Hannibal was waiting for. He was all about the grandeur. The build up to the reveal. It was like a waiting game for him. So, Will titled his head up, almost jutting his chin out.

“How many, do you think, would have realized so much?” Hannibal asked.

“I don’t think most would have made it through the first five minutes of meeting you.”

Hannibal had said as much. Will was only around still because he was found interesting.

“Possibly, but say another did last longer. Do you believe they would have been able to deduce so much about me? In only a few days and in limited conversation?”

No. Because there was no one like Will.

Hannibal read his answer in the stubborn refusal to speak. “It does make me curious,” he mused, moving closer.

“You’re always curious.” That truth was abundantly clear about him. One of the driving forces to Hannibal was his insatiable curiosity. It might have been his only one. “Only the gods know what you’re curious about now.”

“I doubt even they know,” he said, a smile in his tone. “But what do you think happens when you stop fighting yourself? When you let yourself see and be unfettered.”

“Need I remind you that you’re the one who insisted I keep the blindfold on?”

“I would appreciate it if you continued to, but we both know that’s not what I meant.”

Will didn’t respond right away. His heart thumped steadily, slow and strong. Not the heartbeat of someone in front of a monster. His breathing was even, mirroring the steady rhythm of his heart. He shifted his weight, the sharp angles of the statue pressing into him uncomfortably. “I’ll sleep less than I already do.”

Most of his nightmares came from seeing too much already. He didn’t want to think about what would happen if didn’t guard his sight.

“You will become, dear Will.”

Will couldn’t stop the image of Hannibal wearing a razor sharp smile from appearing in his mind.

~TBC~

Chapter End Notes

Whew. That was long.

Please let me know if you see anything questionable/grammatically incorrect/or confusing. My "writing" brain is still trying to settle in so it's not surprising if you see these things. I want to give you guys the best chapters possible!

I hope to be posting regularly again soon:)

End Notes

But seriously, Medusa got done dirty. Like, there was no justice. Why did all the rapist in Greek mythology get off easy? And then some man just comes in a hacks her head off cause he can while she sleeps? And keeps it as a prize?? Bleh. I might like Greek mythology, but I've got a lot of characters I reaaaally don't like.

However, I have seen stuff where they say Medusa's curse was meant as a blessing so that no man could take advantage of her again. I like that idea better.

Works inspired by this one

Cover for Love is Blind by AomaSade

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